

**A Weekly Byte... from Isralight
(Portion of Vayigash)**

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From **Rav Binny Freedman**

A few years ago, when the new wave of violence broke out in Israel, our unit was drafted for nearly forty days as part of an emergency draft order attempting to stem the tide of the violence.

It is difficult to describe how challenging it is to be completely uprooted from your life, literally overnight, with no idea of how long you will be needed, or when you will be able to get back to the routine of job and family. It was more than a challenge; it was often overwhelming. One day I was struggling to keep up with e-mail, and preparing classes for upcoming programs, and the next I was struggling to keep up with the pace of shootings, daily intelligence briefings and preparing briefings for men going out on patrols.

But what we had to deal with was nothing compared to what some of the regular army soldiers and officers, trying to respond to the murderous pace of deadly events unfolding along the 'tunnel road', which ran beneath the terrorist guns in the heights of Beit Jallah, had to do.

I will remember his face forever, though his name eludes me.

He was the deputy commander of the regular army unit working in the area we were responsible for; our positions overlooked the southern suburbs of Bethlehem bordering the tunnel road area and border of Bethlehem to the North, which were his responsibility.

The first time I met him was when he threw himself down on the ground next to me while we were under fire from terrorist guns in Chirbet Aliah, and he clearly had it together; it was always good to meet a younger officer you could work with who knew when to ask questions, and didn't need a nursemaid. After that we often ran into each other on patrol, or responding to the various flashpoints and events in the area.

One afternoon, after a couple of particularly quiet days, his unit responded to heavy gunfire coming from El Khader, one of the Arab villages along the tunnel road south of Jerusalem. A number of families were caught in the crossfire, and the patrol that had arrived on the scene was advancing towards the gunfire, in an attempt to draw fire away from the road, as well as shorten the distance to the gunmen.

The goal in such situations is to set up a cover fire unit, designed to keep the enemy's heads down, while advancing towards the enemy until close enough to charge their position and take them out.

Unfortunately, in this case they had the high ground, and as the Israeli soldiers advanced towards the gunmen, they were caught in a murderous crossfire, from a second group that had been waiting for just such a maneuver.

One of the boys was killed on the spot, and a second was lying under fire, wounded, when their deputy Commander arrived on the scene.

It was an impossible situation; the wounded man, lying near his fallen comrade was crying in agony in the middle of a wide-open area, under heavy fire with almost no cover.

Logic dictated that until heavy re-enforcements, including air support, arrived, there was nothing to be done; the boy was simply unreachable. In fact, as he was within easy reach of some of the Palestinian gunmen, it was clear, in retrospect, that they were simply leaving him out there as bait. Some of the men later reported in the debriefing that they could see grins on the Arab gunmen's faces, every time the wounded Israeli cried out in pain.

Maybe it was too much for this young lieutenant, or maybe he thought he saw a way to get his man out. Or maybe it was the army he was serving in; there is a tradition in the IDF which I have always been particularly proud of, that we never leave a man behind; all the boys come home.

We'll never know; he was the ranking officer on the scene, and he wasn't about to send someone else out to such a nearly impossible mission, so he did it himself. Under heavy fire, he succeeded in reaching this boy, throwing him over his shoulder, and begin his way back. But he never made it, and there are a lot of us who will always wonder whether the watching Arab gunmen waited to cut him down just long enough to make it even more painful. He was cut down not two hundred yards away from safety, and there he lay, with his dead soldier, brothers in death, forever.

I have gone back to that day, and his decision, many times since. Did he manage to say something to that wounded man? Was it worth it, so that an Israeli soldier, not nineteen years old, would not die alone? And most of all was he right? Do you, should you, can you, risk your own life for the possibility of saving another?

Were the men of the police and fire departments right to go into the modern day equivalent of the Valley of Death, on that awful Sept 11th morning?

Indeed, this question is at the heart of the story we read in the beginning of this week's portion, *Vayigash*.

There is a famine in the land, and the entire region is starving. Only mighty Egypt, still irrigated by the Nile River, has plenty of food, and people come from all over the empire to trade for food, and survive. The family of Yaakov is no different, and his ten sons travel to Egypt to barter for food. And in the court of the Viceroy of Pharaoh, Joseph, the slave who has become a mighty ruler, recognizes the brothers who sold him into slavery over twenty years before, though they do not recognize him.

Accused of being spies by Joseph, the brothers claim they are not a band of men, or a military unit, but a family of brothers, whose youngest brother, Binyamin is still back home with their aging father Yaakov.

Joseph, who seems to find their story suspect, eventually allows them to leave, with the admonition that they need not bother returning for food the next time without their younger brother Binyamin in tow.

But Ya'acov who, having lost one son years before cannot bear the thought of sending Binyamin, his only remaining son from his beloved Rachel, down to the dangers of Egypt, refuses to let him go. All of his sons' pleas fall on deaf ears, and even the fact that they are running out of food, and will all starve to death, does not seem to make a difference. Finally, Yehudah (Judah) steps forward and convinces Yaakov to entrust Binyamin to him.

So the brothers come down to Egypt, and are received by Joseph, who eventually sends them home with enough provisions and food to tide them through the famine. And it all seems like a challenging journey will have a happy ending after all, until the hoofbeats of the Egyptian King's Guard are heard in the distance.

The goblet of the Viceroy had been stolen, and the natural suspects were the ten brothers, themselves suspected spies. The punishment for such a crime is to become a slave in the dungeons of Egypt forever. And then the goblet, incredibly, is found in the knapsack of Binyamin....

Shocked and confused, perhaps enraged, the brothers turn around and head back to Egypt with the King's guard now guarding their prisoner, Binyamin. In mourning at the thought of returning to their father Ya'acov with the news that his beloved Binyamin is now doomed to a life of slavery in Egypt, the brothers throw themselves at the mercy of the Viceroy (Joseph) and beg him to release their brother, to no avail.

And it is this moment, which begins our portion, *Vayigash*. Seemingly in an impossible situation, with no way out, Yehudah steps forward, and in what becomes his finest hour, rises to the challenge of saving his brother from a horrible fate.

“*And now, let your servant (me) remain a slave to you, and let the boy go (home) with his brothers.*” (Bereishit 44:32)

Essentially, Yehudah offers himself as a slave in lieu of his brother; he will take his brother's place. Now, life as a slave in ancient Egypt was not worth much, and a slave was at the mercy of his masters. A slave never knew in the morning whether he would live to see the evening, and his life was in constant peril.

And so, we arrive at our question: what justified Yehudah doing this? How could he be willing to give up his life even for that of his brother? Now, we do not, in general, draw halachic (Jewish legal) conclusions from the stories of the patriarchs, so one cannot consider this a purely halachic question. However, we can deduce much from the attitude of the rabbis and Jewish tradition from a particular story; if the Rabbis take a character in the Bible to task, it will usually be because he or she have done something completely contrary to Jewish tradition.

And yet here, the opposite seems to be the case. This moment, where Yehuda offers himself in place of his younger brother Binyamin, is viewed as Yehudah's coming of age, and the watershed experience in Yehudah's life.

Indeed, the sources suggest that it is in this moment that Yehuda the brother becomes Yehuda, father of the Royal Davidic line. So this must be the right thing to do.

In fact, one might surmise, within the context of this question, that perhaps Yehuda felt that his father Yaakov's life was in danger. After all, Yehuda makes it clear that if the boy leaves his father, he (the father) will die (44:22), and points out that:

“*Nafsho' Keshura Be'Nafsho*”
“*His (Yaakov's) soul is bound up with his (Binyamin's) soul.*” (Verse 30)

And yet, Jewish tradition is very clear on this point:

“*Ein Dochin Nefesh Mipe'nei Nefesh*” rules the **Shulchan Aruch** (Code of Jewish law). (Choshen Mishpat 425:2) “*We do not push one life away for another.*” We cannot decide which life is more worthwhile; that is the purview of G-d. Indeed, the Talmud (Pesachim 25b) makes it very clear that I cannot save my own life at someone else's expense, because “*my blood is no redder than his....*”. So it would make sense, therefore, to say that I cannot **give up** my life **for** someone else, because who is to say which life is more valuable; all we know is that we all bleed the same.

In Judaism the individual is not meaningless before the great cause; each individual life is a world, and therefore the concept of giving up your life for the sake of G-d is not something one normally does especially voluntarily.

Rav Ephraim Oshri, the last Rav of the Kovno ghetto, was asked just such a question during the war, and he included his response in his *Mi'Ma'amakim*, (*From the Depths*) a five- volume set of questions he dealt with during the Holocaust.

The question was asked, if it is permitted to step out of line in a death march, in order to help another inmate who has fallen by the side of the road. It was clear that a person who had fallen out of line would be shot as soon as the SS spotted him. At the same time, if you were spotted trying to help such a person, you too, would be shot on sight. So, were you allowed to place your life in danger in order to help someone else?

Rav Oshri ruled that while you were certainly not obligated to risk your life for another, it was certainly permissible.

But in truth, this goes back to why Yehudah could offer his life for another, even his brother and more importantly why the Rabbis all seem to laud this behavior.

The Torah, gives a very straightforward explanation as to why Yehudah feels the need, and even the obligation to offer himself in place of Binyamin.

“*Ki’ Avdechah Arev Et Ha’Na’ar Me’Im Avi*”
“*Because I guaranteed the lad from my father.*” (44:32)

Yehuda explains to Joseph that he has become an *Arev*, for his brother Binyamin. Indeed, back in Canaan, these were the words Yehuda used which somehow seem to convince old Yaakov that he can send Binyamin with the brothers:

“*Anochi E’ervenu, Mi’Yadi Te’vakshenu*” “I will guarantee the lad, from my hand you can ask for his return.” (43:9)

Yehuda tells his father that he will be an *Arev*, a guarantor for his brother’s safety, and somehow this convinces Yaakov that he can let Binyamin go. What is the nature of this ‘*Arevut*’, and why does this suddenly change Yaakov’s mind over all the entreaties and attempts of the other brothers?

Rav Avigdor Nevensahl, in his *Sichot Le’Sefer Bereishit*, points out that *Arevut* is related to the word *Eruv*, or a mixture (like *Irbuv*, or mixed up).

Somehow *Arevut* means Yehuda and Binyamin have become one. True *Arevut* is about becoming one with another.

For example, in Israel today, when a person borrows money, someone else is often asked to guarantee the loan, and that second person is called an *Arev*, or guarantor. And if the person who borrowed the money reneges on the loan, then his friend, the *Arev*, will be made to pay. Not because he agreed to help, but rather because the meaning of that kind of guarantee, or *Arevut*, is that he, too, has actually borrowed the money. If I become an *Arev* for a loan, then I have agreed that the loan is mine as well. Thus, I will owe the money to the creditor just as surely as the initial borrower.

Because true *Arevut* is a statement that we are really one, and as such, your loan is my loan.

This is the same idea behind the halachah (law) that a woman can become married through a ring given by her groom (say, Reuven) to someone else. Imagine a woman says ‘I will be married to you by the ring you give Shimon, who is very poor. The Talmud (*Kiddushin* 7a) rules that if the groom agrees, when he gives the Shimon the ring, the bride becomes his (Reuven’s) wife, and this is called a marriage of *Arevut*.

The reason she can be married, even though she receives no ring, is because when Shimon receives the ring, she receives it as well, because they are one.

Yehuda in effect becomes one with Binyamin, and he is not saying to Joseph ‘take my life instead of his’, rather, my life is his because we are *Arevim*. Essentially this is like asking your abductor to take your left arm instead of your right; the result is the same, because both arms are part of one person. Yehuda has become one with his younger brother Binyamin.

As Rav Nevensahl points out, this would explain why, when *Rav Yochanan* and *Reish Lakish* debate whether a city of Israel can be divided between two tribes, neither brings as a proof the example of

Jerusalem, which is divided between the tribes of Binyamin and Yehudah, (Joshua 8:16, and 15:8; Sanhedrin 111b) because Yehudah and Binyamin for these purposes, are one tribe.

And this explains as well, why the prophet Achiyah HaShiloni, speaking to Achav, the King of the Northern ten tribes, says, "I have given you ten tribes, and him (Rechavam, king of the southern two tribes) only one." (Kings I; 11:31-32) Yet, Rechavam rules over both the tribe of Yehuda, as well as the tribe of Binyamin, except of course, they are really one tribe.

In Judaism, royalty is about the ability to achieve, and even create one-ness. Hence, we now understand Yehudah's willingness to become a slave and place his life in danger, forever, even though he certainly did not steal the goblet. Because when Binyamin stands accused, then Yehuda is facing the consequences as well, since he has become an *Arev* for Binyamin.

Indeed, Yehuda does not even know for sure that Binyamin did *not* actually steal the goblet, but it does not matter. Incredibly, during this entire episode, Yehuda never once asks Binyamin this question, perhaps because that is not the issue. This is not about what Binyamin did, and what Yehuda will do; it is about *who they are*.

Perhaps this is why Yaakov agrees to send Binyamin down to Egypt with Yehuda in the first place. Twenty-two years earlier, tragedy befell the family of Yaakov because the brothers were *not* one. If ten brothers can throw their brother in a pit, and then sit down to have lunch, completely ignoring his cries and tears (Bereishit 37:24-25), then something is terribly wrong.

And one wonders what the real source of Yaakov's pain, and his refusal, for all these years, to be comforted over the loss of his son (Joseph) really is. After all, eventually we must all accept the inevitability of death. Unless Yaakov, who was aware of the undertones of strife between his sons (see 37:10-11) was never really sure what happened out there. And after all, Binyamin is now the beloved and favored son of Rachel, so who is to say history will not repeat itself?

It is only when Yehudah makes clear to Ya'acov that things are different, and the brothers are now one, that Ya'acov is prepared to acquiesce and send Binyamin.

Indeed, when Binyamin stands accused by the King's Guard, with the damning evidence (the goblet) found in his pack, the natural thing to do would be for the brothers to continue home. After all, this time they needn't even conspire, fate is handing them the perfect way to get rid of the new prodigal son. The favorite son will disappear into the dungeons of Egypt, and there really isn't anything they can do.

But this time, it is different, because this time ten brothers refuse to turn their backs and allow their brother to be cast alone into the pit. This time, they act as one and return to Egypt. Despite the obvious motivation to continue on their way, and bring their 'bread' (all the provisions) home, they cannot do it, because they are one.

And this is why, in this moment Yehuda the brother becomes Yehuda the King, who will eventually produce the royal lineage of King David. Because this is what Royalty is really all about.

Maimonides describes the King as:

"His heart is the heart of the entire community of Israel."
(Laws of Kings, 3:6)

The initial condition for an individual one day being declared the anointed King (Mashiach) of Israel is based entirely on this concept.

The Jewish concept of Mashiach is not a magical figure that can walk on water. Rather, he is someone who must be accepted by the entire Jewish people, bar none. In fact, when Maimonides is asked, in a letter from the Jewish community of Yemen whether an individual claiming to be the redeemer is really the Mashiach, Maimonides' answer is, quite simply: 'If you have to ask, then he isn't.' (*Iggeret Teiman*)

In truth, if an individual were to arise today and be accepted by the entire Jewish community, that would be such a miracle, he would *have* to be mashiach!

This is part of the essence of Judaism itself: The *Mishnah* in *Avot* (*Ethics of the Fathers* 4:13) explains that there are three crowns which form the essence of Judaism: the crowns of *Malchut* (royalty), *Kehunah* (Priesthood) and *Torah*. The idea of creating one-ness which is the true essence of *Malchut*, or royalty, forms the essence of the priesthood (*Kehunah*) as well.

In fact, Maimonides (*Laws of Teshuvah* 1:2) points out that in the time of the Temple, when the goat was sent into the desert as part of the Kohen Gadol's (High priest's) atonement service for the entire Jewish people, it gained forgiveness for the lighter transgressions, even for those who did not themselves repent!

This is a challenging concept, to say the least. During the time of the Temple, when the High priest performed the service on Yom Kippur, a Jew was forgiven for certain transgressions, regardless of his own personal state of contrition.

Imagine; a fellow *in the midst of a pork burger* down in Greenwich Village, while the Sa'ir Ha'Mishtaleach (the goat sent into the desert representing atonement for the Jewish people, see Leviticus 16) was sent out, would be forgiven regardless of whether he himself was actually repentant! How could this be?

The Talmud explains (*Shabbat* 139a) that Aaron merited being the High priest precisely because of his sense of oneness with others. In fact, when Moshe was nervous about accepting the mission of redeeming the Jewish people, in deference to his older brother, Aaron, who perhaps was more worthy of the mantle of leadership (*Exodus* 3), G-d tells him:

“*Ve’Ra’achah’, ve’Samach be’Libo”*.

“*When he (Aaron) sees you, he will rejoice **in his heart.***” (*Exodus* 4:14)

In other words, Aaron's joy for your greatness will be so vast in his heart, because your joy is his joy. And this is the essence of the Priesthood, the *Kehunah*, in Judaism.

Indeed, when G-d spoke to the High priest, He spoke to him through the letters (that would light up to give the proper message) on the Ephod, the breastplate, which held the twelve names (and gem stones) of the tribes of Israel. G-d speaks to the Kohen Gadol, the High priest, though the tribes of Israel, precisely because the one-ness of the Jewish people is the essence of the Priesthood itself. In *Ethics of the Fathers*, Aaron is known as the *Ohev Shalom* and *Rodef Shalom*; the Lover and pursuer of peace. Peace, Shalom, is all about shleimut, or wholeness. Only when we are all truly one, and whole, will we ever achieve peace.

The people gain forgiveness for their mistakes when the Kohen actually partakes of the sacrifice (*Pesachim* 59b) because it is not the High priest in the Temple, and the Jewish people outside; the High priest and the people are truly one. When someone of that caliber, who truly embodies and feels the meaning of being one with every single Jew (and eventually every person in the world) is in the sanctuary on Yom Kippur, even the Jew eating pork in another part of the world, cannot help but be affected. And something inevitably stirs within him.

The fact that Jews everywhere do not experience this yearning to come home to their identity, is as much a factor of the dearth in a true leadership, of teachers who can experience and convey the essence of the idea that we are all really one.

And Torah too, is based on the goal of being one. Hence, at Sinai (Shavuot 39a), we all accepted as a people, the idea that:

“Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh La’Zeh.” “All Jews are responsible for one another.”

We are all meant to be Areivim; this is our greatest challenge: to achieve this one-ness, first as a people, and eventually as a world.

Indeed, on a certain level, if I am sitting at my Shabbat table, and my fellow Jew is driving to a casino on Friday night, then if I really understand and aspire to this sense of one-ness of which we speak, part of me is in pain. Part of me isn’t at my Shabbat table; I am in that car with my brother, driving to that casino.

But, this same Areivut also means that even if you are in the car on the way to the casino, and I am at my Shabbat table, part of you is with me at my Shabbat table.

If I am in Israel, and yet my fellow Jews are in dungeons in Iran, or sitting by the pool in Los Angeles, then part of me isn’t really in Israel; it is still in that dungeon in Iran, and by the pool in L.A.

The Arevut of Sinai means that if any one of my brothers or sisters; any Jew, anywhere, is in pain, then I am in pain. And if any Jew is experiencing joy, then I am rejoicing as well. And this is the Arevut that allowed a Natan Sharansky, sitting in his cell in the Chistopol prison in Moscow, to rejoice when the Israeli commandoes stormed the Ugandan airport at Entebbe and brought our people home.

Notice that throughout this entire story, Yehuda never says anything to Binyamin. This is not about how could you do it; it is about whatever you do, and wherever you are I am with you.

Binyamin is lost, it seems, and about to be enslaved forever. And Yehuda, and for that matter all the brothers, would not be blamed for merely accepting destiny and moving on.

But in that moment, when all seems lost, Yehuda steps forward and demonstrates that wherever we are, we can all be one. And in that moment, Yehuda, whose soul was stained with the tragic error of instigating the sale of his own brother Joseph so many years before, becomes the Yehuda he was always meant to be. In that moment, Yehuda the son of Yaakov becomes Yehuda, the King of Israel.

Leadership in the Jewish people has never been about being above it all; it is about being at one *with* us all. And perhaps the message of this week’s portion is the challenge for each of us to find that little bit of Yehuda inside us all.

May Hashem bless us, in this age when we are so in need of such leadership, that one day soon, the prayer with which we complete the Shemoneh Esrei, (the core prayer of the Jewish people) will soon come to pass, and

“ Ve’Arvah La’Hashem Minchat Yehudah Ve’Yerushalayim, Kashanim Kadmaniot.”

May the offering of Yehuda, who represents the ability to become one, and Jerusalem, that city of peace and wholeness where two tribes became one, be pleasing to Hashem as in the days of old.

Shabbat Shalom,

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