

The Buck Stops Here

Why was Judah the only one of the brothers to intercede with Joseph on behalf of Benjamin? The Torah tells us he was the *Arayv*, guarantor, who promised to return Benjamin to his father. Chazal criticize Judah for this saying that for 40 years in the desert his bones rattled in his casket. He was excommunicated and refused entry to the heavenly assembly until Moshe pleaded that he be admitted. What pushed Judah to accept this responsibility?

Mechilta (B'Shalach) quotes a discussion between Rabbi Tarfon and his students as to why Judah merited monarchy. The students suggested 3 answers: 1) he admitted his culpability in the Tamar incident; 2) he took responsibility for Benjamin; 3) Nachshon Ben Aminadav, Yehuda's descendant, jumped into the raging waters of the Red Sea and blazed a path for the people to follow. What was unique about each incident any why were all three required?

In his debate with Joseph, Judah displayed required core character traits for a Jewish king. The first requirement is a king must admit when he is wrong. A king must act properly (*Ehrlich*) and be *Modeh Al HaEmes*. A leader who admits his error indicts and convicts himself. Admitting liability and guilt is a great sacrifice on the leader's part. It takes great courage for a person to admit that he made a mistake. His personal streak of vanity prevents him from admitting his error. For example, politicians rarely admit mistakes. A country will never admit that their discredited policies were in error. The leaders of nations that opposed the Nazis believed that they conducted the war correctly. Even in the face of obvious mistakes they persist in this fiction and lie. Great criminals never admit they were wrong. They claim they are innocent and persecuted. In their minds, the victims are always guilty. This same streak of vanity divides friends and spouses. It is a sickness that we find everywhere, even among Roshei Yeshiva who argue and refuse to admit they erred. A king who refuses to budge from his opinion can destroy a country, or a world. Hitler *Yimach Shmo* never admitted making a mistake even when it was clear that his tactics in pursuing the war in the Russian winter led to his demise.

A king admitting a strategic mistake is one thing; it is even rarer when he admits personal mistakes. Judah married the daughter of a Canaanite, *Shua HaAdulami*. This marriage was fraught with disappointment and sorrow, as noted by the death of his 2 sons and the shame he endured with his involvement with Tamar. Imagine an American President saying *Tzadkah MiMeni*! Yet Judah was able to. In *Tanach*, every king had his designated prophet at his side. Saul had Samuel. David had Gad

and Nathan. Solomon had Achiyah etc. The role of the prophet was not to aggrandize himself to the king. Rather it was to rebuke him to change his ways, to prod the king to be *Modeh Al HaEmes*, admit his mistakes. Sometimes a successful person who refuses to accept criticism surrounds himself with “yes-men” who fear rebuking their benefactor. The Torah was concerned that a king should never surround himself with “yes-men”. Prophets like Nathan, Elijah, Isaiah or Jeremiah never simply agreed with the king. Judah did not have a prophet to push him to admit his mistake. He did it on his own. *L'Olam Y'hay Adam Y'Ray Shamayim B'Sayser U'Bagaluy U'Modeh Al HaEmes*. This was Judah.

The second requirement is that a king must accept responsibility for *Klal Yisrael*. Many people live without any responsibility for someone other than themselves. Someone may be very wealthy, but fail to recognize that he must support his spouse or his own children. Such people don't even exhibit the level of responsibility an animal has for its young. Many animals refuse to feed themselves until they provide for their own children. On the other hand there are parents who spoil their children by giving them every material thing they ask for, but don't take responsibility for developing their children's personalities. They may have the best of intentions, yet they lack a sense of responsibility when it comes to their children. Yet others care for their own but lack responsibility or feeling for other Jewish children and their needs. Others may be great philanthropists yet lack some other aspect of responsibility. The greater the leader, the greater the responsibility. Reb Chaim used to say a head of a household is responsible for his house. The town Rabbi is responsible for his town. A *Gadol Hador* is responsible for the Jewish community. Greater ability and prominence manifests in greater responsibility.

Because of his important role, the Torah has a separate section for a leader, *Nasi*, who sins. The king is responsible for the entire nation. Because Tzidkiyau did not rebuke the people who re-subjugated the slaves they freed at the Jubilee, Jeremiah prophesied that Hashem will bring the Babylonians to destroy the Temple and capture and blind Tzidkiyahu. Tzidkiyahu was culpable because as king he was responsible for his people's actions.

At the time of Joseph's sale, had Judah felt responsible for his brother, he never would have sold him. Reuven felt responsibility, but failed to act on it. Judah endured the loss of 2 children, the scandal of Tamar, diminished prestige among his brothers because he failed to take responsibility to save Joseph so many years previously in Dosan. Judah's suggestion to solve their dilemma by selling Joseph was not leadership, it was a cold compromise. However, when it came to step up

and descend to Egypt to purchase food he interceded with Jacob to take responsibility for Benjamin. In Vayigash we see a different Judah, willing to challenge the Egyptian Viceroy, who could put him to death without a second thought. Judah did not know that he would be successful. However he finally assumed his responsibility, He told Joseph “I am responsible, no one else”. He said how can I go up and see **my**, not **our**, father. That sense of responsibility was required for *Malchus*.

The third requirement for a king is to be prepared to sacrifice himself for the *Klal*, to act seemingly in an irrational way to blaze a path for others to follow. A king does not wait for others to lead nor does he act jointly with others. Moshe was the only one who considered entering the raging waters of the Red Sea when he ordered the people go forward. Nachshon, the grandson of Judah, impulsively, irrationally, jumped into the sea to lead the way. Rambam says that *Meshugaim* (crazed individuals) built the world. This refers to those who did not make calculations and rationalizations before acting. Only such people jump into the sea and lead.

The Midrash comments on the verse *Af Gam Zos BhYosam B'Eretz OyVeyhem Lo M'Astim L'Chalosam L'Hafer Brisi Itam* that it refers to the great Jewish personalities throughout our history who acted irrationally yet with the utmost responsibility to ensure our survival. Did Ezra act rationally when he led the people in rebuilding the Temple? Did the Maccabees calculate their odds of victory before battling the Greeks? Did Rabbi Akiva and his friends make *Cheshbonos* when they resisted the Romans? Did Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi act rationally when he wrote the Mishna for future generations that at the time appeared would never arise? Did Rambam forego the Mishne Torah at a time that Judaism's survival was in grave doubt? They all acted out of an irrational responsibility, *Shigaon*. If Jews would have acted based on a *Cheshbon*, would we have Eretz Yisrael today? It is due to these selfless leaders who followed the path of Nachshon Ben Aminadav and Judah that brought us to this point. This is responsibility, leadership and ultimately *Malchus*.

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