

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Professor William Schwartz. "May his Neshama have an Aliyah!"

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7 TEVET

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS VAYIGASH

Flawed Behavior

And these are the names of the children of Yisroel coming to Egypt...And the children of Yehuda; Er and Onan and Shayla and Perets and Zerach; but Er and Onan died in the land of Israel... (46:8-12).

This week's *parsha* opens with Yehuda's climactic confrontation with Yosef and Yosef's ultimate revelation as the long missing brother. Yosef, as a ruler of Egypt, then encourages his father and the entire family to migrate to Egypt where he will provide for them. The Torah goes on to name the descendants of Yaakov who came down to settle in Egypt.

Oddly enough, in the enumeration of Yaakov's descendants coming down to Egypt the Torah mentions two of Yehuda's children (Er and Onan) who had predeceased this emigration. Why would the Torah mention their names here if they weren't on the roster list of those moving to Egypt? Perhaps as strange, in *Sefer Bamidbar* (26:19) when Hashem asks Moshe to take a census of Bnei Yisroel, broken down by the families of each tribe, once again Er and Onan are mentioned as sons of Yehuda who had previously died in the land of Canaan. What is the Torah trying to tell us?

The Torah in *Parshas Vayeishev* (38:6 see Rashi ad loc) recounts the events that led to the deaths of Er and Onan and introduces the concept of a levirate obligation – that a surviving brother marries the childless widow to perpetuate the name of the deceased brother. Yehuda had chosen Tamar, a woman of exceeding beauty, as a wife for his son Er. Er was intent that Tamar retain her youthful beauty and refused to impregnate her in a sinful manner. He was put to death by Hashem for being evil.

Yehuda then asked his second son Onan to marry Tamar and raise children for his deceased brother. But Onan refused to impregnate Tamar, knowing that the children would not be considered his own. So Hashem put him to death as well.

Unbeknownst to Yehuda, Tamar lured him into performing the levirate obligation himself and the children of their union were Perets and Zerach (see Ramban ad loc and his explanation of the levirate marriage being a transmigration of the souls of the deceased into the newly born children). Thus, Er and Onan are actually reborn as the twins Perets and Zerach, and are continually relevant throughout the Torah.

Perets (the older of the two twins) seems to be the incarnate of Er (the elder brother) while Zerach seems to be the incarnate of Onan, the younger brother. From Perets comes the Davidic dynasty and the royal lineage of the Jewish people that will also one day produce the messiah. Zerach also had a famous descendant, Achan, the man famous for embezzling from the monies set aside from Bnei Yisroel's first conquest in the land of Israel (see *Sefer Yehoshua* 7:1).

This is difficult to understand; both Er and Onan sinned grievously and were punished by Hashem with the ultimate penalty as their lives were forfeited. How is it that from Er comes the Davidic dynasty and from Onan comes the most famous embezzler in the Torah?



The Gemara (*Sukkah* 52b) mentions that one of Hashem's "regrets" is creating the evil inclination. In fact, the Gemara goes on to quote a *passuk* whereby Hashem takes responsibility for causing man to sin via the *Yetzer Hora* (see Rashi ad loc).

A tenet of creation is that man was created with both a spiritual soul and a physical body. Thus, man is a being that is constantly at battle with these two components that are often pulling in opposite directions. Yehuda's son Er sins because he is being drawn in by a physical desire – that his wife remain beautiful in his eyes. However, Onan sins in a far more grievous way: he doesn't want to perpetuate the name of his brother. This failure – that of not wanting to do a kindness for a brother – isn't merely a capitulation to physical desires, it's a profound character flaw. Hashem may take responsibility for causing the *Yetzer Hora* to compel man to cave in to physical desires, but a character flaw is man's own failure.

Thus from Onan comes a descendant who has a deep character flaw as well. His descendant Achan was an embezzler. The real travesty of embezzlement isn't merely the desire for money, it is the betrayal of trust. In fact, the only way a person can be an embezzler is if someone places their trust with him. This betrayal is egregious and reflects a deep character flaw.

Building Community

And Yehuda he sent ahead of him to Yosef to prepare (46:28).

Prior to uprooting his entire family and moving to Egypt, Yaakov sends his son Yehuda ahead of the move to "instruct." Rashi (ad loc) gives two explanation for this "instruction" (*l'ehoros* in Hebrew means "to instruct"); either that Yehuda would clear a location for the family and give instructions on how to build a community that would accommodate the family or that Yehuda would build a Yeshiva from which instruction (i.e. Torah teachings) would come forth.

According to Rashi's first interpretation, it is easy to understand why Yehuda was sent to make the preparations; Yehuda is both the leader and the administrative head. However, if the goal was to build a Yeshiva, why didn't Yaakov dispatch Levi who was the Rosh HaYeshiva and caretaker of the family's Torah teachings?

Most people believe that the word Yeshiva comes from the Hebrew root of *yoshaiv* – to sit. In other words, a Yeshiva is a place where people are "sitting and learning." But this explanation cannot be correct for according to the Gemara (*Megillah* 21a) the original obligation to study Torah included the obligation to stand while

studying. Only after the death of Rabban Gamliel and the subsequent generations began to weaken in strength was it permissible to study Torah while sitting.

Rather the root of the word Yeshiva comes from "*yishuv*" – a settlement. In other words, a Yeshiva isn't an institution that has its students locked away in an ivory tower, rather a Yeshiva's role is to build Jewish community. A Yeshiva should set the tone for moral and ethical Torah standards and be the compass that points a community in the right direction. A Yeshiva must create a Torah environment that becomes the life-force of a community and be the cornerstone on which communities are built.

This is why Yaakov chose to send Yehuda and not Levi. The building of a Yeshiva is the beginning of the establishment of a community, and Yehuda was the leader of that community. Thus, Rashi's two interpretations are really one and the same; Yaakov sought to build a community and for that purpose he sent Yehuda to build a Yeshiva.

Did You Know...

In the beginning of this week's *parsha*, Yehuda tries reasoning with Yosef in regards to the imprisonment of Binyamin for stealing the goblet. During this discussion Yehuda says, "You are the same as Pharaoh." The Medrash (*Bereishis Rabbah* 93:6) explains he meant that he was going to kill Yosef, after which he was going to kill Pharaoh.

Upon hearing this, Yosef signaled to Menashe, who stamped his foot against the floor and caused an earthquake throughout the palace. Yehuda then yelled with so much spiritual power that Dan's son Chushim (who was actually deaf) heard it from Canaan. Chushim then appeared next to Yehuda in an instant (using *Kefitzas Haderech*), and together they continued yelling. As a result, 300 Egyptian nobles collapsed with their faces contorted in terror - this expression stayed with them for the rest of their lives. Furthermore, two cities near there, Pisom and Rameses, were also destroyed by their yelling.

Taking the hint, the other brothers began stomping the floor, breaking it into pieces and causing Yosef to fall off his throne. The force of their stomping was so strong that even Pharaoh, in his own palace, fell off of his throne.

Yosef saw that Yehuda was preparing for battle, and he became scared. However, when Yehudah tried to withdraw his sword he was unable to do so and said, "The man before me is obviously very righteous." At which point, Yehuda resumed reasoning with Yosef.

Flawed Behavior Continued

Hashem wants man to work and refine his character, and at the end of the day, this is the purpose of all the *mitzvos*. Observance of *mitzvos* without making the effort to constantly improve one's character is missing the point. Avoidance of the pitfalls of the human condition is only part of the process and the path to personal growth. The real effort (and it is, in fact, much harder

work) must be placed in refining oneself to constantly become a better person.

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