

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Miret Fruma Chaya bas R' Ephraim Mordechai. "May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

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Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS VAYEISHEV

Creating Eternality

It was at that time that Yehuda went down from his brothers [...] (38:1).

This week's *parsha* recounts the story of how Yosef's brothers came to sell him and the disastrous effect it had on their father Yaakov. The brothers blamed Yehuda for taking a leadership role in the sale of Yosef and demoted him from his leadership position within the brotherhood (see Rashi ad loc).

Thereafter, the Torah goes into extraordinary detail following the personal life of Yehuda; he married and his wife bore him three sons. "Yehuda took a wife for his son Er, his firstborn; her name was Tamar. But Er was evil in the eyes of Hashem and He put him to death" (38:6-7). Yehuda then approached his second son, Onan, and asked him to "enter into a levirate marriage" with Tamar, the widow of Er, in order to establish children for his deceased brother.

Onan initially agreed and married her, but then reneged and refused to impregnate Tamar because the children would not be credited to him. Thus, Hashem put Onan to death as well. After which, Yehuda told his now twice widowed daughter in law, "Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up [...]" (38:11). Once Tamar saw that much time had elapsed and Shelah was not being offered to her as a husband, she orchestrated – through subterfuge – for Yehuda himself to impregnate her. Tamar eventually gave birth to twins, and Yehuda fulfilled the levirate marriage responsibility himself.

There are many difficulties with the Torah's narrative. To begin with, why does the Torah recount in such detail the formation of Yehuda's family? None of the

other brothers received such attention. There are many interesting stories involving the formation of their individual families, yet the Torah only hints at the details (e.g. Shimon and Dinah).

Even more perplexing: When the Torah later recounts the lineage of Yehuda's family (*Bereishis* 46:12 and *Bamidbar* 26:19) the Torah mentions each time that Yehuda had two sons who passed away, even though both died childless and seemingly had no part in the continuing lineage of Yehuda's family. The Torah, as we know, is very meticulous with every letter of every word. Why is this seemingly meaningless history of Yehuda's family repeated?

The key to understanding the story of what transpired in this *parsha* in its entirety begins with Ramban's cryptic allusion to the deeper meaning and significance of the levirate marriage. Ramban (38:8 – see R. Chavel's *Hebrew Ramban Al Hatorah*) refers to this as "a great secret of the secrets of the Torah, one that had been known to the wisest of men even before the Torah." Ramban seems to allude to the levirate marriage as being a way for allowing a transmigration of the soul of the deceased into the child of a levirate marriage. In other words, the twins born to Tamar and Yehuda essentially replaced his first two children, the deceased husbands of Tamar (i.e. Er and Onan). Therefore, throughout the Torah when mentioning the children of Yehuda, Er and Onan are still relevant because they are actually considered alive through Peretz and Zerach.



Miami Edition

More importantly is the understanding of the selflessness required by the person who undertakes to perform a levirate marriage. There is an enormous amount of energy, responsibility, and sacrifice involved in raising one's own children. However, in the end, a parent feels that a piece of him lives on. In a levirate marriage, all the effort, sacrifice, and responsibility expended is for someone else. This is truly difficult and it is why we find several times in the Torah where this opportunity is turned down. Only the truly selfless individual would take on such a thankless burden.

This explains why the Torah goes into such detail in this particular case. Yehuda is establishing the royal line of the monarchy of the Jewish people. The Torah is teaching us that the greatest attribute of a king is that he understands that the enormous responsibility of ruling the Jewish people is not about one's own honor; rather it is about empowering others. It isn't about getting credit, it's about getting things done. The two main stories on the establishment of the Jewish monarchy are found here and in the story of Rus (great-grandmother to King David) – both of which are products of a levirate marriage.

A Question of Morality

His master perceived that Hashem was with him, and that Hashem made whatever in his hand succeed (39:3).

Yosef is sold by his brothers to traveling merchants and he eventually ends up being bought from the Ishmalites by Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh, to be a slave in his household. The Torah goes on to relate that Hashem blessed anything that Yosef was involved in, eventually leading Potiphar to appoint Yosef over his entire household and manager of his financial interests.

The Torah describes Yosef as being very handsome – both in form and in appearance. This detail doesn't escape Potiphar's wife who becomes enamored with him and convinced that she is destined to bear his child. Potiphar's wife expends great effort trying to seduce Yosef. Yosef, in trying to explain to her why he cannot do as she wished, makes a very odd statement: *"There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has denied me nothing but you, since you are his wife. How then can I perpetrate this great evil? I will have sinned against God!"* (39:9).

Essentially, Yosef puts forth the following two arguments: 1) My master has trusted me with everything in his house. I have control over everything except for you, his wife. If I were to be with you, it would be a terrible violation of his trust! 2) This is also wrong because I will be sinning against God as well.

Yosef's priorities seem to be somewhat out of order. How could he possibly place malfeasance against his master ahead of sinning against Hashem? To make matters even worse, Rashi (39:11) records the opinion that if his father's image hadn't appeared to him, Yosef would have capitulated. How does that dovetail with the reasons that Yosef gave Potiphar's wife?

Both Rambam and Ramban indicate that the purpose of keeping the 613 *mitzvos* is for the moral development of the individual (see Vilna Gaon in *Even Shleima* for a clear articulation of this concept). However, this is not the purpose of the

Noachide laws – which are primarily social justice laws for the world.

Yosef was primarily concerned that committing adultery would be a betrayal of the trust vested in him by his master. This ultimate violation of trust would indicate a complete lack of integrity – a failure of morality. While it's true that adultery is one of the Noachide laws, it is only a secondary concern, since observance of the Noachide laws does not require a person to be a Godly being.

However, being a descendant of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov does demand Godliness. Seeing the vision of his father reminded Yosef of his roots and his obligation to act in a manner that reflected their mission in life: to imitate one's Creator. The actions of a Jew should not be governed merely by what is permitted and prohibited, but rather by Hashem's requirement to be a moral and ethical human being.

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