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"THE CREATIVE USES OF CRISIS"

Last week we tried to explain why Jacob bequeathed the mantle of leadership not to his favorite son, Joseph, but to Judah. Today I should like to offer an answer to the question of why this gift of מלכות (sovereignty, leadership) was given by Father Jacob to Judah rather than to Reuben, who as the eldest son was the most likely candidate for that office.

In order to appreciate the choice of Judah over Reuben, let us go back just a bit into the life of Jacob, to the painful episode when the viceroy of Egypt, whom the brothers do not recognize as Joseph, demands of the brothers that they bring with them on their next trip their youngest brother Benjamin -- who is the only full brother of Joseph. Meanwhile, Joseph holds Simeon as a hostage. The brothers return to Jacob in Canaan, and when the provisions begin to run low, they plead with their father to entrust Benjamin to them so that they may go down to Egypt and restock their dwindling supplies. But Jacob is, understandably, adamant. He will no longer trust his sons, certainly not with the only child he has left from his beloved Rachel. The sons continue to implore their father to accede to their request, but the more they beseech him, the more is the old father reluctant. Finally, out of sheer desperation, the eldest son Reuben turns to his father and says, I will guarantee the safe conduct and return of Benjamin, and if not: את שני בני תמית, you can take the life of my own two children in return. Jacob listens to this strange offer of holding his own two grandsons as hostages, and his answer is negative. He will not give over Benjamin into the care of Reuben. At last, it is Judah who speaks and says: I will guarantee the safe return of Benjamin, and if not, וחטאתי לך כל הימים, "then let me bear the blame forever." The Tradition maintains that Judah here offered as surety שני עולמות, his two worlds. If he would not restore Benjamin to Jacob, then he would yield his claim to both worlds. He would be willing to abdicate his life in this world, and his immortality as well. Jacob listened to this offer -- and he accepted. He gave over Benjamin into the safe keeping of Judah, and sent the brothers on their way to Egypt.

Now, two questions present themselves to us. First, what kind of man did Judah and Reuben take Jacob for, that they felt constrained to offer either the lives of their children or their continued existence both in this world and the next? Did they detect, what no student of the Bible ever had, that there was in Jacob a streak of cruelty? Second, why, given the shocking offers, did Jacob accept that of Judah and reject that of Reuben?

My answer is based on an insight provided by one of the Hasidic giants, the Sochochover Rebbe, the author of "שם משמואל." Man, he tells us, possesses an enormous inner reservoir of hidden talents and mysterious powers and concealed forces. Rarely do we make use of even a fraction of these capabilities. It is only when we are shocked, when we are pushed to the outer and utter limits of responsibility, when we are traumatized by crisis which we confront in all its agonizing directness, that we can invoke these secret powers. Only by קבלת אחריות, by accepting all contingencies, even pure accidents, and risking everything we have or are or possess -- only by this assumption of super-responsibility -- can we conjure up these almost demonic forces from within ourselves and use them creatively. For these powers are the sleeping giants in the depth of the soul, that can be summoned up only by the medium of crisis.

Judah and Reuben -- and, of course, Jacob -- understood this. Hence, they were willing to undertake קבלת אחריות to an extreme. They were each willing to guarantee the safety of Benjamin, without conditions, and to offer either the lives of their children or their own both worlds as guarantee. They knew and they understood that if pushed to these outer limits of their endurance, their inner powers would not fail. They relied, as did Jacob, on the creative use of crisis.

This insight of the author of "שם משמואל" will explain to us why the two brothers felt they had to go to such length to convince Jacob. Without this great risk and crisis, they would never be able to exploit their own capacities for the protection of Benjamin. Why, however, did Jacob respond affirmatively to one son and negatively to the other?

I believe the answer lies in the personalities and characters of Reuben and Judah. Jacob considered Reuben too unstable. As we read in today's Sidra, on his deathbed Jacob characterizes Reuben as פחז כמים, unstable as water. Jacob knows that in the course of crisis, when the lives of his children are at stake, Reuben will somehow marshall his inner forces and succeed in his missions. But when the crisis has ebbed, these same inner forces will recede and wane, and he will be the same vulnerable Reuben once again, victimized by the same old infirmities and paralysis and enfeeblement. Judah, however, was made of a different mettle. Once he has exposed himself to the shock-treatment of crisis, and revealed those inner and hidden potencies, they will always be available to him, even afterwards. Judah, therefore, could be entrusted not only to take along Benjamin and restore him to his father, but with the permanent מלכות or leadership of the tribes of Israel.

Reuben therefore was rejected as a leader because, פחז כמים, unstable and mercurial, Jacob was worried that אל תותר, he could not keep leadership because these inner forces will notkeep and remain at his disposal after the crisis is over. Judah, however, was given leadership: לא יסור שבט מיהודה, "the sceptor shall never depart from Judah," because Judah's newly discovered and newly revealed strengths also לא יסור, do not and will not depart from him once he has become aware of them.

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It is unfortunately true that most people are like Reuben, not like Judah. Most of us rise to great occasions greatly; we then revert to pettiness when life envelopes us in petty contexts. In crisis, we may be mighty, magnanimous, and creative. But in the routines of life, we turn slothful, insipid, and uninspired.

But if we cannot boast of Judah's qualities, the leadership of the Jewish community today demands of us at least that we exploit Reuben's nature: that we allow the thunderclap of crisis to arouse the giants that lie dormant within us.

I do not believe in fomenting artificial crises, much like those journalists who used to invent crime-waves when all other news of sensational value had receded and there was nothing left for the front pages. There is nothing inherently more virtuous in "viewing with alarm" than in "pointing with pride."

But when there <u>is</u> a genuine crisis at hand, it should be utilized in order to ivoke loyalty and strength. At such times, to allay and to pacify, to dull the shock and smother the crisis with the security blanket of vain assurances, is self-defeating and innane.

And we are all in crisis today. America is in crisis with the resumption of the bombing in North Vietnam. We had been promised that "peace is at hand," and work up to discover that with our bombs we are grinding a small country underfoot. It is doubtfull whether the moral fabric of this country can survive any more such treatment.

Israel is in crisis. The discovery that young kibbutzniks have betrayed their country should not, as has been said, be used as a club to beat an entire movement. But it cannot be escaped: the inner contradictions between Marxism and Zionism have surfaced, and they have thrown a whole segment of Israeli society into genuine crisis.