YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT MIKETZ**

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Dedicated in memory of my grandmother, Mrs. Irene Schenker *z”l*,  
by Zachary Schenker

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**Yosef and Yehuda**

**Rav Shimon Klein**

Our *shiur* this week will focus on two characters in the *parasha*: Yosef and Yehuda. The first rises from the depths of jail to the lofty heights of Egyptian viceroy. The second succeeds in persuading Yaakov to part with Binyamin, assuming responsibility for him on the journey to Egypt. These two events are part of a much broader picture, and our discussion will therefore go beyond the confines of our *parasha*.

Let us begin with an exercise in imagination. Let us forget for a moment what actually happens after the brothers rid themselves of Yosef and he is taken to Egypt, and let us focus on two characters – Yosef and Yehuda. What are the anticipated effects of the traumatic event that has just taken place on each of them?

Yosef, a seventeen-year old boy, has just lived through a terrible experience. The ongoing hatred and jealousy of his brothers has culminated in a collaborative attempt to kill him. Reuven has managed to avert his immediate death at their hands, and so he is thrown into a pit. His cries and pleas go unheeded and he is drawn out of the pit by wandering Midianites; he is then sold to Ishmaelites as a slave, and taken to Egypt. In what state would we expect to encounter him a month later? One can easily imagine a broken figure, his self-confidence shattered, his psyche irreparably scarred by what he has lived through.

Now let us consider Yehuda. Yehuda is one of the ten brothers who participate in the sale of Yosef. In the wake of Reuven’s suggestion that the brothers not actually kill him, but rather leave him to die in a pit, it is Yehuda who addresses the others:

And Yehuda said to his brothers, “Of what profit is it if we kill our brother and cover his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let us not lay our hand on him, for he is our brother, our flesh.” And the brothers listened to him. (*Bereishit* 37:26-27)

Yehuda defines the casting of Yosef into the pit as “killing.” He asks, “In what way do we gain from this form of killing, and the covering of our brother’s blood?” He then suggests a more moderate proposal: selling Yosef to the Ishmaelites.[[1]](#footnote-1) In general, Yehuda felt the same way as his brothers did concerning Yosef, but at the same time, he was a moderating influence. In any event, we do not expect this event to have far-reaching impact on Yehuda’s life story.

Let us now have a look at what actually happens. The story of the sale ends at the end of chapter 37.[[2]](#footnote-2) The text then immediately goes on to describe events on two different fronts. First, regarding Yehuda:

And it was at that time that Yehuda went down from his brothers, and turned in to a man of Adullam, whose name was Chira. (38:1)

In the next chapter, the story is about Yosef and all that happens to him in Egypt. The text presents the two stories in such a way as to suggest a contrast, and we will now turn our attention to these two contrasting scenes, starting – for reasons of methodology – with Yosef.

**Yosef in Egypt**

Yosef reaches Egypt, where he is bought by Potifar, Pharaoh’s chamberlain. From that moment on, God is with him and causes him to prosper:

And Yosef was brought down to Egypt, and Potifar, chamberlain of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. **And God was with Yosef, and he was a successful man**; and he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian. And his master saw that **the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper** **in his hand**. And Yosef found favor in his sight, and served him; and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he had, he put into his hand. And it came to pass from the time that he had made him overseer in his house, and over all that he had, that **the Lord blessed the Egyptian’s house for Yosef’s sake, and the blessing of the Lord was upon all that he had in the house and in the field**. (39:1-5)

Yosef is helped by God every step of the way; he also finds favor in the eyes of his master, who leaves all that he has under Yosef’s control. In the midst of this unexpectedly positive turn of events, Yosef finds himself in a difficult situation concerning his master’s wife, who tries to tempt him, but Yosef withstands the test valiantly. His response to her advances is quite astonishing:

But he refused and said to his master’s wife, “Behold, my master does not know what is with me in the house, and has given all that he has into my hand. There is none greater in this house than I; neither has he withheld anything from me but yourself, because you are his wife. How, then, can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?” (39:8-9)

This is the moral argument of someone who is loyal to his master and views betrayal of him as a sin against God. One cannot help but be astounded. Where are the psychological scars, the effects of the brothers’ hatred, on this young man? Where are the traces of having been left to die in a pit and then being sold as a slave? The text offers no real signs of any such inner conflict or distress.

Yosef finds himself in trouble because of Potifar’s wife, and he is cast into jail. Amazingly, he once again he gets back on his feet, and here, too, God is with him in all his endeavors:

And Yosef’s master took him and put him into the prison, a place where the king’s prisoners were bound, and he was there in the prison. But **the Lord was with Yosef, and showed him mercy, and gave him favor in the sight of the officer of the prison**. **And the officer of the prison gave into Yosef’s hand all the prisoners that were in the prison, and whatever they did there, he was the doer of it.** The keeper of the prison did not to look to anything that was under his hand, **because the Lord was with him, and whatever he did, the Lord caused it to prosper**. (39:20-23)

Yosef rises up from the depths a third time when Pharaoh has his dream and there is no one who can interpret it for him. The young man is brought out of the prison to stand before Pharaoh and propose his interpretation:

And the thing was good in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of all his servants. And Pharaoh said to his servant, “Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom is the spirit of God?” And Pharaoh said to Yosef, “Since God has shown you all this, **there is none so discreet and wise as you**; **you shall be over my house, and at your word all my people shall be ruled;** only in the throne will I be greater than you.” And Pharaoh said to Yosef, “See, **I have set you over all the land of Egypt**.” **And Pharaoh took off his ring from his hand, and put it on Yosef’s hand**, and arrayed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain around his neck, and caused him to ride in the second chariot which he had, and they called before him, “Bow the knee!” and **made him ruler over all the land of Egypt**. And Pharaoh said to Yosef, “I am Pharaoh, and without you no man shall lift up his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.” And Pharaoh called Yosef’s name Tzafnat Pa’neach, and he gave him Asnat, the daughter of Potifera, priest of On, as a wife. (41:37-45)

Pharaoh meets Yosef and is impressed by him. He calls him “a man in whom is the spirit of God,” and asserts that “there is none so discreet and wise as you.” He appoints Yosef over his entire household and decrees, “At your word all my people shall be ruled.” “See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt,” he says, and hands over his ring, giving Yosef authority over all of Egypt.

The gap between the situation of the rejected seventeen-year old who is brought to Egypt and sold as a slave and the man whom Pharoah has entrusted with the reins of power over Egypt is unfathomable.

**Yehuda goes down from his brothers**

Let us now return to Yehuda and the events of his life following the sin. We will start with his first step:

And it was at that time that Yehuda went down from his brothers, and turned in to a man of Adullam whose name was Chira. (38:1)

“And it was at that time” – in other words, in the context of the preceding events; the episode about to be described took place during the period following the sale of Yosef. “That Yehuda went down from his brothers” – the choice to “go down” is Yehuda’s; he parts company with his brothers. “And turned in (*va-yet*) to a man of Adullam whose name was Chira” – the verb “*va-yet*” connotes a turning off a path, an “ending up” somewhere rather than heading there deliberately. Perhaps this “deviation” or “wandering off” is meant in the sense of his joining himself to a man of Adullamite identity and – even more so – of taking a Canaanite wife: “And Yehuda saw there a daughter of a Canaanite man whose name was Shu’a, and he took her, and went in to her.” This is by any measure a problematic situation. The woman herself is not described as being a Canaanite, but rather as the daughter of a Canaanite man. In other words, Yehuda knowingly aligns himself with the Canaanite father, and this is a clear demonstration of distancing himself from the family tradition.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This is the starting point of Yehuda’s decline. He begets three sons;[[4]](#footnote-4) the years go by, the eldest son marries Tamar, but “Er, Yehuda’s firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord slew him.” The reference to Er **as Yehuda’s firstborn** in the verse describing him as “wicked in the sight of the Lord” seems to indicate Yehuda’s part in the death of his son. The second son, Onan, is not prepared to enter into *yibum* (levirate marriage) with his sister-in-law:

But Onan knew that the seed would not be [considered] his, and so it was that when he came into to his brother’s wife, he spilled [his seed] on the ground, lest he give seed to his brother. (38:9)

Then we read, “… so [God] slew **him also**.” The “also” serves to connect his death to that of his elder brother, such that the death of both sons is shown to be bound up with Yehuda’s behavior. At this stage, Tamar is rejected as a wife for Shela, since Yehuda suspects that she is the reason for the death of his sons. His own wife dies, and on his way to his Adullamite friend, Yehuda turns to a harlot on the road, giving her his signet, his cord, and his staff as a pledge for payment (v. 18).

To summarize thus far: A schism opens in Yehuda’s world. He goes down from his brothers, and this “going down” becomes a steep descent into the abyss. The descent takes many years – long enough to marry, to have three sons, to marry off the eldest, to arrange for the levirate marriage of the second after his elder brother dies, and to decide against *yibum* for his third son.

Thus, the Torah describes the effects of the sale of Yosef in two different realms: the realm of Yehuda, with all that happens to him, and the realm of Yosef, with all that happens to him. It is interesting to note the introduction to each of these two contrasting pictures. Yosef is described in passive form, as being acted upon against his will:

And **Yosef** **was brought down** to Egypt, and Potifar, chamberlain of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the hands of the Ishmaelites **who had brought him down** there. (39:1)

Yehuda, in contrast, is described in the active case, as proceeding on his own initiative: “And it was at that time that **Yehuda went down** from his brothers…” (38:1). Despite being brought down against his will, Yosef rises higher and higher, while Yehuda sinks lower and lower.

What underlies this sharp contrast?

**The world of *beri’a* (creation) and the world of *yetzira* (formation)**

Before continuing our examination of the events of our *parasha*, let us return to the very beginning of the Torah – the first two chapters, introducing us to two worlds.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Chapter 1 is the chapter of “*beri’a*”: It starts with the statement, “In the beginning, God created (*bara*) the heavens and the earth,” and concludes with the statement, “And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, for on it He rested from all His labor which God had created (*bara*), to do.” The chapter of “creation” describes the transition from nothingness to existence. Prior to this, nothing existed; now, there is existence. In essence, the act of creation is reserved for God; it lies beyond man’s capability. And in this chapter, man is described as being created “in the image of God” – in other words, with a resemblance to Divine qualities such as wisdom and spirituality, which are separate from matter. Man is elevated, transcending the here and now; he is God’s representative in this world, charged with imbuing the world with Godly content. In truth, the entire world is a single domain under the rule of God, Who is the Creator, blessing man and the world and determining their purpose. Free choice and personal desires do not feature in this chapter.

Chapter 2 introduces a new movement into the world, that of “*yetzira*” – formation. In contrast to “creation,” which embodies the transition from “nothingness” to “existence,” formation connects things that already exist, such that something new arises from different existing elements. Unlike creation, which is reserved for God, formation is essentially an activity that belongs to man, who synthesizes, builds, and develops the world.

In the first chapter, man is elevated, superior, similar perhaps to an angel in his perfection, in the mission implanted within him by God. Man as depicted in the second chapter is not such a superior being. He is created from the dust of the earth; he is considered “a living being” – like other living beings – but at the same time, he has an advantage: the Divine spark within him. If he can become aware of his inner world, his desires, the living soul within him, he may make his life very meaningful.

The difference between these two accounts would seem to boil down to the question of where Divinity is to be found in the world. Does it exist in the heavens, above and beyond the world, as aspired to by man of chapter 1,[[6]](#footnote-6) or is Divinity anchored and grounded in this world?[[7]](#footnote-7) According to the first view, man is created in the image of God, and through his life he embodies this similarity to his Creator. He is, as it were, a shadow of the perfect, complete entity that exists somewhere “out there.” The second view describes God as bringing His Presence into this world, into life. A person opens up to the living soul within him, its purpose, the profound and significant processes that it undergoes and causes. We propose that Yosef, in his life, embodies the man depicted in chapter 1, while Yehuda embodies the man depicted in chapter 2.

**The world of *beri’a***

That Yosef represents the world of *beri’a* is evident from his words to the royal butler and the royal baker while in prison with them:

They said to him, “We have dreamed a dream, but there is none to decipher it;” and Yosef said to them, “Do interpretations not belong to God? Tell me, I pray you.” (*Bereishit* 40:8)

The royal servants seek someone who can explain their dream; Yosef responds that “interpretations belong to God” and then immediately urges them, “Tell me, I pray you.” Yosef sees himself as a mouthpiece for God’s word. He does not mean that he is awaiting some prophetic revelation, but rather that his own words will be a true and faithful reflection of God’s word. In the background there is the Divine guidance and aid that he has received throughout this period. Another manifestation of this world-view is to be found in the following description:

And Pharaoh said to Yosef, “I have dreamed a dream, but there is none to decipher it; and I have heard it said of you that you can hear a dream to decipher it.” And Yosef answered Pharaoh, saying, “**It is not me** (or “without me”)**; God shall give Pharaoh a favorable answer**.” (41:15-16)

What I will say is not my own personal message; rather, it is God Who will provide a response that will set Pharaoh’s mind at rest. Again, Yosef sees himself as a faithful emissary of God and His word.

Another, different expression of the same idea is to be found in the scene where, following the death of Yaakov, the brothers fear, “What if Yosef will hate us, and pay us back the evil which we did to him?” In order to evade his revenge, they invent a will supposedly addressed by their father to Yosef: “Forgive, I pray you now, the trespass of your brothers.” Yosef’s response, incredibly, is to tell them:

“Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? While you thought evil against me, God meant it for good, to bring it to pass at this day that many people should be saved alive. And now, fear not: I will nourish you, and your children.” And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. (50:19-21)

Although your intentions were evil, it was not your thoughts that caused events to happen, but rather the Divine plan, for which your actions were a vehicle. This is Yosef’s reality, with its focus on the Divine plan unfolding in the world and with less attention to human free choice and responsibility for events.[[8]](#footnote-8)

“**Only in the throne will I be greater than you**”

What is the nature of Yosef’s leadership? Three times he rises to greatness while in Egypt. First, he becomes steward over the house of Potifar, then he is put in charge of everything in the prison, and finally he is viceroy over all of Egypt. In each of these situations, he is in fact the “number two” figure. Although he has responsibility for everything in Potifar’s house, Potifar retains his status. When Potifar’s wife tries to tempt Yosef, he remains loyal to his master:

But he refused, and said to his master’s wife, “Behold, my master does not know what is with me in the house, and has given all that he has into my hand. There is none greater in this house than I; neither has he withheld anything from me but yourself, because you are his wife. How, then, can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?” (39:8-9)

In his next position of authority, in prison, he occupies a similar status, complementing but not replacing the officer of the prison. The third time, Pharaoh gives Yosef authority over all of Egypt, while emphasizing at the same time, “Only in the throne shall I be greater than you.” On the one hand, “I am Pharaoh!” On the other hand, “without you no man shall lift up his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.”

What is entailed in this position in which Yosef finds himself over and over again? The “number one” figure is the leader; it is he who makes the decisions and he bears ultimate responsibility. The “number two” does what needs to be done; he carries out the policy outlined by his boss. He is not responsible for the big picture, nor is there any need for him to ask himself, “What do I want?” since it is not he who decides on policy. In three different contexts, Yosef stands alongside the “boss,” acting in an objective manner with great integrity, and receiving Divine aid: “Whatever he did, the Lord caused it to prosper.” With no prejudice or personal bias, he provides the proper response, guiding Egypt safely through the difficult years of famine.

The foundation for this “right-hand man” status might perhaps be detected in the circumstances of Yosef’s childhood. In our *shiur* on *Parashat Vayeshev*, we noted the family structure of Yaakov’s household. There is the domain of the father, and the domain of the brothers; in between them stands Yosef, who technically is one of the brothers, but actually is more closely aligned with Yaakov. Yosef is the child of Yaakov’s old age, and he is closer to Yaakov’s thinking than he is even to his own independent perspective.[[9]](#footnote-9) It is difficult not to see a connection between that situation and the position he now occupies in the eyes of God and also vis-à-vis his Egyptian masters. During his childhood, he adopted his father’s perspective – a view from above. Now, he adopts the Divine view of reality; he acts as God’s emissary, distancing himself from his own subjective view.[[10]](#footnote-10) Towards his masters, as well, he subjugates himself with complete loyalty. This is a quality that is deeply engraved in his psyche; it is from this position that he proceeds, and God causes him to prosper.

Let us now return to the question we started with. Yosef has had some very difficult experiences, including having his brothers conspire to kill him and being sold as a slave. It is reasonable to expect a person who has this sort of history to be severely scarred, devoid of faith in anything or anyone, and lacking even in self-confidence. Now we understand how far Yosef is from any such state. He has no bad feelings towards himself, since God decides and He guides what happens. He is not torn by doubts, since he believed in his dreams and regarded them as a sort of Divine vision, which he should try to fulfill. Yosef stands tall, holds his head up high, and turns his downfall into a huge success story.

**Speaking the language of life**

How far removed Yehuda is from the description above! Following the sale of Yosef, he chooses to “go down” from his brothers; he marries the daughter of a Canaanite man and his sons die. He grows further and further away from the family and its traditions, descending a slippery slope whose end is not clear. What is the reason for the stark contrast between himself and Yosef? We shall seek the answer to this question in the hints we find in Yehuda’s behavior.

Let us begin with his role in the sale of Yosef. Yosef appears in the distance to the brothers, who conspire to kill him, and the first to respond is Reuven, who wants to try to save him. After failing to deter them, he appeals to the brothers: “Do not spill blood; cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him” (37:22). He proposes that they avoid causing Yosef’s death directly; instead, he may be left to die in the pit. The apparent rationale behind this proposal is that the evil outcome will be the same, but their hands will remain clean, for they will not have spilled his blood. “In order to save him from their hand, to bring him back to his father” – Reuven’s argument is successful and he persuades them, but the text shares with the reader what is going on in his head: his intention is to come back later, secretly, and bring Yosef back to Yaakov.[[11]](#footnote-11)

At first, Yehuda remains silent. Only in the second stage does he enter the picture:

And Yehuda said to his brothers, “What profit is it to us if we kill our brother and cover his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let our hand not be upon him, for his our brother, our flesh;” and his brothers listened to him. (37:26-27)

His words are a response to Reuven’s suggestion, and what he is saying is that casting Yosef into a pit is tantamount to murdering him. How would we benefit from killing him? he asks. Essentially, Yehuda rejects this questionable show of clean conscience, insisting that they take responsibility. Under this banner, he demands some stock-taking: what are we doing? Throwing someone into a pit is the same as killing them and covering the blood. “Covering the blood” is a sign of evasion; it represents the inability to face the blood that has been spilled and take responsibility for it. “What profit is there?” is a question formulated in the language of life. What is this all about? Where are we headed? These are expressions of an inner world that goes beyond measured words.

Yehuda makes his own proposal: “Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites…” This is not a certain death sentence; it leaves room for things to happen, it allows for God and for reality to enter. “But let our hands not be upon him” – since killing him indirectly is still killing. Unlike Reuven, who speaks of Yosef in the third person without naming him, Yehuda calls him “our brother,” and includes himself within the fraternity.[[12]](#footnote-12) “For he is our brother, our flesh” – these are expressions of closeness. “And his brothers listened to him” – within the very same verse they already accede. The Sages of the Talmud define Yehuda’s suggestion here as a compromise.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Even at first glance, the essential differences between Yosef and Yehuda are clear. Yosef is committed to his dreams, to the truth that burns within him; Yehuda is committed to the brothers. Yosef maintains, “Let the law pierce the mountain,” while Yehuda opts for compromise. Yosef dreams and speaks directly from this elevated viewpoint; Yehuda acts in the wake of reality and in response to it. Yosef is the emissary of his father; Yehuda is the emissary of the brothers, understanding them and their language. He is able to contain Yosef, too, referring to him as “our brother, our flesh.”

**Yehuda’s attribute of responsibility**

The *parasha* goes on to tell us more about Yehuda. Yosef sends the brothers to bring Binyamin. This decree is a difficult one for Yaakov to accept, and he tarries. Once again it is Reuven who responds first, and Yehuda only afterwards. Reuven, in an attempt to express to Yaakov the degree of his commitment to guard Binyamin and bring him back safely, declares: “Slay my two sons if I do not bring him to you; deliver him into my hand and I will bring him back to you” (42:37). This fails to convince Yaakov. Yehuda waits on the sidelines, biding his time.

And the famine was severe in the land. And it was, when they had eaten up the corn which they had brought from Egypt, that their father said to them, “Go back, buy us a little food.” (43:1-2)

Yehuda waits, leaving reality to have its say. Only after his father utters his request, and in the context of the dialogue that has now opened between them, he says,

“Send the lad with me, and we shall arise and go, that we may live, and not die – both we, and you, and also our children. I will be surety for him; of my hand you shall require him, if I do not bring him to you and set him before you, then I shall have sinned to you forever.” (8-9)

Yehuda speaks sincerely and logically to his father and takes personal responsibility. I will be surety; I am the address for your request. Like Reuven, Yehuda also commits himself, but unlike Reuven, who speaks of killing his two sons, Yehuda focuses on his own personal responsibility and accountability, regarding any failure here as a sin that will remain with throughout his life.

Another milestone on Yehuda’s path is the moment of truth when Yosef orders the brothers to leave Binyamin in Egypt as his slave. Yehuda stands tall and gives a sterling performance. Indeed, he succeeds in softening the heart of the cold, unfeeling viceroy who can no longer restrain himself and tells them, “I am Yosef, your brother” – thereby bringing him back into the family fold. What is Yehuda’s secret in this presentation? Seemingly, it is his simple, logical speech, in the language of life, that achieves the desired result. Yehuda retells the story, revealing the deeper recesses of his own position as well as those of the brothers and of their father. Yehuda’s speech is a human story, “what we have been through.” It is not ideology, not fancy words. He simply tells the truth as it is, with great sincerity, allowing Yosef to feel the family, to sense Yehuda’s distress and that of the brothers, to appreciate the unrelenting pain of his father. To all of this Yehuda adds his own readiness to bear the consequences: “I pray you, let your servant remain in place of the lad as a bondman to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers.” This is the sense of responsibility that was so sorely lacking when the brothers had cast Yosef into the pit so many years previously.

Returning to our original question, we have seen how Yosef is dealt a harsh blow by his brothers, but he is not broken. He views the situation as a test, and continues to act with all his previous zest and courage – and God is with him. Yehuda, in contrast, is tuned to his inner world. For him, the issue is not the realization of a dream that exists “out there.” Rather, the focus is within his world, within reality, in the bonds within the family, in a manner that does not pass over the heads of people. This path has suffered a stunning blow, and for this Yehuda assumes responsibility. Taking responsibility, in Yehuda’s terms, does not mean adhering to one’s vision at all costs. Taking responsibility means bearing the consequences. I am responsible for something that happened; I failed. The family, my father’s household, has fallen apart as a result. Now, this failure will be reflected in my behavior. I will no longer occupy the position of someone who is whole and perfect, since I am not worthy of it; instead, I will be exactly what and where I am. The immediate outcome of this line of thought is a personal regression, a “going down” from his brothers, marriage to the daughter of a Canaanite, and an almost systematic progression towards the abyss.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**Conclusion**

In this *shiur* we have contrasted two figures – Yosef and Yehuda. We identified an enormous gap between their respective trajectories following the sale of Yosef. Against all expectations, Yehuda sinks into a lengthy decline, while Yosef surges to greatness. The gap in mental attitude is just the tip of an iceberg – the much broader and more significant gap that gave rise to the great tension between the brothers. On one side stands Yosef, alone; on the other stand all the brothers, led by Yehuda.[[15]](#footnote-15) This tension is not a localized phenomenon: the thread of this fundamental divide runs through the history of the “children of Israel” throughout all the generations, until the redemption. And even then, both forces continue to be manifest, in the form of two messiahs – *Mashiach ben* *Yosef* and *Mashiach ben David*.

The gap is based on objective facts, predating any personal behavior or mistakes. There are two very different spiritual worlds at play, with friction between them. So long as no bridge connects them, so long as the equations allowing them to contain one another have not yet been worked out, the tension will prevail; there may even be war. In the background are the two chapters that are the gateway to the Torah – two conceptual systems that represent the dual foundation upon which the world rests. This foundation exists in every living organism, in every life system, and now it is manifest, in all its potent force, within Yaakov’s household. One conceptual system assumes that the basis for all existence is the knowledge that the world is created; it is subject to God’s Sovereignty, and at its pinnacle stands man, created in God’s image and in His likeness. He tells God’s story to the world, clarifying the purpose that God intends for it. At the same time, there is another story, telling of God making room for man, leaving an empty space the size of the world, which is given into man’s hands. Man is given responsibility, he is given discretion to make decisions. At the center of the first story stands God. At the center of the second narrative stands man. The tools at the disposal of man in the first narrative are exploration of Creation and the word of God. The tools at the disposal of man in the second narrative are his living soul – the spark of God within him and a profound commitment on the part of a being created from dust, who will ultimately return to the dust, towards the world from which he emerges, to make its connections and to tell its story.

There are two figures and two stories. Yosef is the representative of the first story; Yehuda is the representative of the second. Over the course of these *parashot*, there has been a fierce struggle within the family, as the first step on a long historic voyage in which these two forces will continue to wrestle with one another. The first will paint a vision and maintain an absolute truth; the second will be committed and obligated to life. The first belongs to “heaven;” the second to the tissues of life, with responsibility – even a pledge – for their existence. The tension between them will continue forever, and it will tell the dual, altogether not self-evident story of a nation that contains within itself an important dimension of heaven and an important dimension of earth, and is called upon to forge a bridge between them.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. This was his intention. As things turned out, even before his suggestion could be implemented, the Midianites passed by, raised Yosef out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites: “And there passed by Midianite men, merchants, and they drew and lifted up Yosef out of the pit, and they sold Yosef to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver, and they brought Yosef to Egypt” (*Bereishit* 37:28). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. With the words, “And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted; and he said, ‘For I will go down to my son mourning into Sheol;’ thus his father wept for him. And the Midianites sold him to Egypt, to Potifar, Pharaoh’s chamberlain, a captain of the guard” (37:35-36). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Vayeshev* 9) puts it as follows: “‘That Yehuda went down’ – this is as it is written, ‘Yehuda has dealt treacherously and an abomination has been committed in Israel’ (*Malakhi* 2:11). What is the meaning of ‘Yehuda has dealt treacherously’? … Further on it says, ‘Yehuda became His Sanctuary’, but here it says, ‘For Yehuda has profaned the holiness of the Lord which he loved and has married the daughter of a strange god’ (ibid.). ‘And Yehuda saw there a daughter of a Canaanite man whose name was Shu’a’ (*Bereishit* 38:2) – when was this? When he separated himself from his brothers, as it is written, ‘That Yehuda went down.’” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. His involvement and presence wane. At first we read, “And she conceived and she bore a son, and he called his name Er.” The verse describes a pregnancy and a birth, and a name given by Yehuda, the father. Next, we read, “And she conceived again, and bore a son, and she called his name Onan” – here it is his wife who gives the child his name, with no mention of Yehuda. By the time the third son is born, “And she conceived yet again, and bore a son, and she called his name Shela; and he was at Keziv when she bore him” – Yehuda is no longer present; he is in Keziv at the time of the birth. The name “Keziv” may allude to disappointment (*akhzava*) and resentment towards Yehuda in view of his dwindling involvement in his family. The *midrash* states, “‘He was in Keziv when she bore him’ – ‘Keziv’ and ‘Shela’ both allude to the same idea, for it is written concerning Elisha, ‘Do not deceive (*tashleh*) me’ (*Melakhim* II 4:28), and it is also written there [with the same meaning,] ‘Do not deceive (*tekhazev*) your handmaid’ (ibid. 4:16).” (*Sekhel Tov, Bereishit* 38) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For elaboration of the ideas presented here in summarized form, see our *shiur* on [*Parashat* *Bereishit*](http://vbm-torah.org/archive/parsha75/01-75bereishit.htm). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In the first chapter, God is not present in space. God is described as the Creator of the world, bringing the world into existence through His utterances and remaining separate from it. His activity is described using the verb “*va-yomer*” (and [God] said); there is no “physical” action or intervention on his part. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In the second chapter, God is depicted as being present in the world, dwelling in it and operating through its cannels: “But no plant of the field was yet in the earth, nor had any herb of the field yet grown, for **the Lord God had not caused it to rain** upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground… And **the Lord God formed man** of the dust of the ground, **and breathed into his nostrils** the breath of life, and man became a living soul. And **the Lord God planted** a garden eastward in Eden, and there **He put the man** whom **He had formed**. And out of the ground **the Lord God caused to grow** every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the mist of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil” (*Bereishit* 2). God causes it to rain; He breathes life into man; He plants trees in the garden. These wondrous descriptions depict God as existing and active within the world, like just another “player” on the playing-field of life. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. When faced with his brothers, Yosef recalls his dream and makes an attempt to fulfill it. This is another example of Yosef placing the Divine plan at the center of his consciousness, rather than human considerations and choices. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “And Yosef brought an evil report of them to their father. And Yisrael loved Yosef more than all his sons, for he was the son of his old age, and he made him a coat with long sleeves” (37:3); “And Yisrael said to Yosef, ‘Are your brothers not feeding the flock in Shekhem? Come, and I shall send you to them. And he said to him, Here I am. And he said to him, Go, I pray you, see whether it is well with your brothers, and well with the flocks, and bring back word to me.’ So he sent him from the valley of Chevron, and he came to Shekhem.” (37:13-14) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Expressions such as, “Do interpretations not belong to God? Tell me, I pray you” (40:8) or “It is not me (or “without me”); God shall give Pharaoh a favorable answer” indicate that the speaker is uttering God’s words and acting as His agent. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. From the point of view of Reuven’s leadership, this is not a bad solution. It might cause real chaos in the family, since the brothers will now leave the site with the conviction that Yosef is dead, but at some stage they will discover that Reuven saved him behind their backs. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Reuven talks about what they will do, but does not include himself among them: “And Reuven said to them, ‘Do not spill blood; cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him.’” The continuation, too, is characterized by his lack of solidarity with the brothers: “In order to save him from their hand, to bring him back to his father” – a plan that he will carry out behind their backs. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “R. Meir said: The term *botze’a* (‘one who brings about compromise’) refers to Yehuda, as it is written, ‘And Yehuda said to his brothers, ‘Of what profit (*betza*) is it if we kill our brothers…’. And anyone who praises Yehuda is in fact blaspheming, as it is written, ‘He who seeks profit (*betza*), renounces God.’ R. Yehoshua ben Karcha said: It is meritorious to seek compromise, as it is written, ‘Execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates’ (*Zekharia* 8). But surely, where there is strict justice there is no peace, and where there is peace there is no strict justice! What, then, is the type of justice that entails peace? We must say – arbitration (compromise). Thus, the text records that ‘David would execute justice and righteousness towards all his people’. But surely, where there is strict justice, there is no righteousness; and where there is righteousness, there is no strict justice! What, then, is the type of justice that entails righteousness? We must say – arbitration” (*Sanhedrin* 6b). R. Meir attributes to Yehuda a position of compromise and views this in a negative light. R. Yehoshua ben Karcha views it as a meritorious act, and this is also the conclusion that is reached in the discussion. Yehuda – and, later on, King David – is presented as someone who adopts the path of compromise. We propose that this is not the result of weakness, but rather a conclusion that emerges from a place of containment, of human commitment to the process. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Where is the turning point in this descent? Yehuda decides not to allow his son Shela to marry Tamar based on his interpretation of what happened to his first and second son and his suspicion that their deaths were attributable to her. The reader knows something that Yehuda does not know: that Er died as “the firstborn of Yehuda” and that Onan died, “him, too” – i.e., the background to his death is similar to that of his elder brother. Tamar, too, knows that it is not she who is responsible for the death of Yehuda’s two sons. She wants to take the path of levirate marriage and continuation, and in order to achieve this, she disguises herself as a harlot on the roadside and takes courageous action to assert her place as part of the family. At the same time, she conveys a message to Yehuda, and it would seem that it is this message that holds the key to his “salvation.” Via the messenger, she tells him, “Recognize, I pray you (*haker na*) – to whom do the signet and the cord belong?” Her words recall the brothers’ words to Yaakov when they came and showed him the coat of long sleeves, dipped in blood: “Recognize, I pray you (*haker na*) – is this the coat of your son, or not?” Tamar’s words allude to the sale of Yosef and Yehuda’s role in that episode. But no mention is made of Yehuda in that particular encounter with Yaakov. In addition, we might ask how Tamar would have known of the dipping of the coat in the blood. Apparently, the expression “*haker na*,” common to both episodes, is not supposed to be a semantic connection, but rather one of essence. The brothers produce the garment that is the most tangible sign of the father’s preference for Yosef. Showing this garment dipped in blood is tantamount to saying to Yaakov, “Look where the coat is right now – dripping with blood.” What need is there for the words, “Recognize, I pray you – is this the coat of your son, or not?” Is it not patently clear that Yaakov recognizes the coat? It seems that the intention of the brothers is to invite Yaakov to recognize and acknowledge in a most profound sense the role that the coat has played in what has happened. The coat symbolizing Yosef’s favored status is now dripping with blood, and Yaakov would do well to ask himself – why? The brothers are alluding to Yaakov’s role in the result. Now, it is not clear whether Tamar is aware of this story, but her present situation is essentially similar. Yehuda thinks that Tamar is responsible for the death of his sons. Tamar, on the other hand, knows that the blame lies with him, not with her. And here she encounters an opportunity to prove this. The wife of Yehuda has died, he is going to his friend to join in the sheep-shearing, and she waits for him, disguised as a harlot. She understands the thinking of the man who is going to turn in to her and knows that he will pay handsomely. The price will be a kid of goats; in the meantime, she asks for the important items that identify him – his cord, his signet, and his staff. Logic would demand that Yehuda act with caution: he should not agree to hand these items over to a woman he does not know. But Yehuda does not hesitate, and he gives them to her. Later on, when it becomes known that she is apparently pregnant from illicit relations, Yehuda judges her swiftly and harshly: “Bring her out and let her be burned.” Tamar is brought out and she quietly sends him the personal items he left as a pledge, along with an appeal to his conscience: “Recognize, I pray you, to whom the signet and the cord belong.” She invites him to recognize the situation for what it is and to awaken his conscience to his part in bringing it about. “Please, Your Honor, take note where your personal items have been. A harlot on the roadside took them from you.” It is as though she is asking Yehuda, “Where are you? Take note of how low you have sunk!” The context, with the judge suddenly becoming the accused, along with Tamar’s words, put up a mirror to Yehuda, and from this point he starts making his way back into the family fold. The text records, “And Yehuda recognized them and he said, ‘She has been more righteous than I, for it was because I did not give her to Shela, my son.’” Yehuda compares himself to her and concludes, “She has been more righteous than I.” I am guilty; she is not. These words may be understood as Yehuda’s acceptance of responsibility for the dark period of his life that led to the death of his sons. We might note further that this entire unit is written in the language of life – the language of Yehuda. On this playing field, the question that Tamar poses to him serves as a lifeline; it is mirror placed before him, showing him for what he is, for what he has become, and causing him to embark on his return. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. At the first stage, Yehuda is not yet the leader. Later, over the course of the events that follow, he gradually starts to take his place until, at the climactic moment of confrontation, at the beginning of *Parashat Vayigash*, he succeeds in causing Yosef to identify himself: “I am Yosef, your brother.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)