BS”D

*Parshas Miketz*

Why did Yaakov accept Yehuda’s pledge and not Reuven’s? Their actual pledges were not that different. The difference lies in the different natures and characters of the two brothers.

Reuven and Yehuda

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

The sons of Israel go down to Egypt to procure food during the famine. They stand before the viceroy of Egypt who, unbeknownst to them, is actually their brother Yosef whom they sold into slavery. Yosef recognizes them, and he brilliantly sets up a situation that tests the brothers and gives them an opportunity to redeem themselves. He insists that they bring their youngest brother Binyamin to Egypt with them. Otherwise, one brother, Shimon, remains a hostage. Otherwise, they cannot purchase any more food in the future despite the famine.

When the brothers return home with the bad news, their father Yaakov adamantly refuses to send Binyomin. After all, his beloved son Yosef never returned when he was sent to find his brothers. Binyamin, the only other son of his deceased wife Rochel, was at risk of death, too, if he left for Egypt.

The oldest son Reuven seeks to convince his father to send Binyomin. He promises to bring him back. Reuven says, “You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you.”

Yaakov absolutely refuses. Yehuda, the unofficial leader of the brothers, bides his time. When the family has eaten the remainder of the grain that had been brought from Egypt, Yaakov asks his sons to go back to Egypt to get some more food.

Yehuda speaks up. He says that if Yaakov sends Binyomin, the brothers will go. But if he doesn’t, Yehuda bluntly states they will not go.

Note how Yehuda, unlike Reuven, doesn’t beg Yaakov to send Binyomin. He simply declares that without Binyomin they won’t go.

Yehuda then makes a proposal. He accepts personal responsibility to bring Binyomin back. If he fails, he says, “I shall stand guilty before you forever.”

Yaakov takes Yehuda at his word and sends Binyomin down to Egypt with his other brothers.

Why did Yaakov accept Yehuda’s pledge and not Reuven’s? Now, as I pointed out, Yehuda’s timing was much better than Reuven’s, as was how he presented the option of not sending Binyomin at all: then we don’t go and we starve.

But the actual pledge is not that different. Reuven pledges himself so totally that he says, you can kill my children if I fail to bring Binyomin back. Yehuda guarantees his whole being, his whole life. Are these guarantees so different one from the other?

The difference really lies in the different natures and characters of these two brothers.

Back in the previous portion of Vayeshev, the Torah tells us how the brothers plan to kill Yosef as they see him approaching. Reuven intercedes. He argues that they should not kill Yosef directly. Rather, they should throw him into a pit where presumably he would die on his own. The brothers agree with Reuven and cast Yosef into a pit. But Reuven’s intention is to go back to the pit and save Yosef.

Meanwhile, an Ishmaelite caravan approaches. Yehuda suggests that instead of allowing Yosef to die in the pit, the brothers sell him to the caravan. They agree, and Yosef is sold and eventually brought to Egypt.

But where was Reuven at the time? The Torah reports that when Reuven returned to the pit and found it empty, he rent his clothes in grief. His plan to save Yosef had failed. But where was he when the brothers decided to sell Yosef?

There is a well-known interpretation by the Rashbam that the brothers didn’t actually sell Yosef. They planned to sell him to the approaching Ishmaelites. But some Midianite traders reached the pit first. It was they who took Yosef out of the pit and sold him to the Egyptians. (See Breishis 37: 28)

If we accept this scenario, then Reuven and the brothers were together when they decided to sell Yosef to the Ishmaelites. Reuven must have gone quickly to the pit to save Yosef but discovered that he wasn’t there anymore. The Midianites had beaten the brothers and the Ishmaelites. They had found Yosef and taken him away.

If we don’t accept this interpretation and it was indeed the brothers who directly sold Yosef, we’re back to our original question: Where was Reuven then?

Rashi, quoting the Midrash, has two suggestions. The brothers took turns going back home to help their father Yaakov. That day happened to be Reuven’s turn, for which reason he wasn’t with his brothers when they sold Yosef. Or, continues Rashi, Reuven was involved in fasting and doing penance for his sin of “desecrating his father’s bed” and was not present.

What do these two incidents—Reuven’s plan to save Yosef and his failure in carrying it through—tell us about Reuven’s character? Reuven had a really good heart. He immediately sought to save Yosef. Later, when Yaakov did not want to send Binyomin, Reuven immediately came forward and pledged to bring Binyomin back.

We get another glimpse of Reuven’s character in our Parsha. When Shimon was taken hostage by Yosef and the brothers were told to bring Binyomin, the brothers reflected on how they were being punished because they didn’t heed Yosef’s cries as he pleaded with them not to sell him. Reuven says, “Did I not tell you, ‘do not wrong the boy?’” So we see Reuven hadn’t merely planned to sneak Yosef out of the pit. He had actually urged the brothers to spare him in the first place.

Reuven had good impulses, but he didn’t follow through adequately. After he saved Yosef from being killed, he had no business going home to Yaakov even if it was his turn. Surely he could have made other arrangements. Yosef’s life was at stake, it was not the time then for other obligations, and certainly not for penances. But Reuven didn’t feel that. He impulsively saved Yosef, then he went on his other businesses, assuming somehow that he’d be able to rescue Yosef from the pit later. Big mistake.

Similarly, when pleading with Yaakov to send Binyomin, Reuven impulsively guarantees Binyomin’s return. Yaakov is totally uninterested in this. It’s an impulsive statement not guaranteed to be followed through on.

Yehuda, on the other hand, plans carefully. He waits until there is no food. He doesn’t beg Yaakov. In fact, he simply refuses to go without Binyomin. Finally, he guarantees Binyomin’s return with his own integrity.

Yaakov knows his sons. He knows that Reuven means well. But so what? He also knows that Yehuda is methodical. He thinks things through. He gets things done. It’s not Yehuda’s words that convince Yaakov. It’s his personality.

Reuven was a truly good person. But he failed to stop the sale of Yosef by being distracted, by not being single-minded.

Yehuda might not have had as good a heart as Reuven, but he was tenacious, and he got things done. Indeed, as we read in the next Parsha, he pleaded so eloquently for Binyomin that, as the Ramban understands it, even the Egyptians began pleading to free Binyomin.

In Chassidic writings, the quality of Reuven is “seeing” (as his name implies). That’s a level associated with profound love of G-d. Yehuda is “thanks and acknowledgment” (also as implied in his name). It is the quality of dedication and self-sacrifice. On some level, it is not as spiritual as “seeing.” But on the other hand, it represents a transcendence of self and the ultimate cleaving to G-d.

We have much to learn from the contrast of the two brothers. Pure heart and pure motives are not enough. We need to follow through with the practical. It’s not enough to feel good feelings and think good thoughts. We must tenaciously and single-mindedly get good things done. If we feel like Reuven but act like Yehuda, we will accomplish wonders.