

Rabbi Dr. Dvir Ginsberg

Rosh HaYeshiva

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Yehudah and Yosef – The First Encounter

In the beginning of next week's parsha (yes, next week's parsha), we are witnesses to the impassioned plea by Yehudah on behalf of himself and his brothers, the fate of Binyamin, and possibly Bnai Yisrael, in the balance. As we all know, Yosef, after hearing Yehudah's presentation, reveals his identity to his brothers, and the reconciliation begins. Yet it is interesting to see that Yehudah, at the end of **this** week's parsha, initially presented a strong case on behalf of Binyamin's innocence, ultimately rejected by Yosef. This initial back and forth between Yehudah and Yosef is of pivotal importance in understanding Yehudah's brilliance, both solidifying and justifying his position as the leader among his brothers.

At the end of this week's parsha, a crisis of untold proportions befalls the sons of Yaakov. After much discussion, Yehudah had convinced Yaakov to allow Binyamin to travel with the other brothers to Egypt to obtain more food. The importance on returning Binyamin safely back to Yaakov can not be overstated and it seemed that the brothers were going to be successful.

They'd reclaimed Shimon, received provisions and were on their way. But Yosef, as we know, had other intentions. After planting his royal cup in Binyamin's bag, he sends his emissary to catch up to the brothers, and accuses them of stealing. The brothers deny all knowledge of this crime, offering an assertive pledge (Bereishis 44:9):

"He among your servants with whom it is found, he shall die. We will also be servants to my master."

As they return to the palace, the Torah goes out of its way to let us know that Yehudah would be taking charge:

"Yehudah and his brothers came to Yosef's house. He was still there, and they fell to the ground before him."

The emphasis on **Yehudah** and his brothers, rather than the brothers only, clearly delineates Yehudah's role as representative. Upon their reappearance before Yosef, standing before this most powerful leader, the fate of Binyamin hung in the balance. At this point, Yosef addresses them rather harshly (ibid 15):

"Yosef said to them, "What is this deed that you have done? Do you not know that a man like me is an expert diviner?""

Rashi, in explaining Yosef's accusation, writes as follows (ibid):

"Did you not know that a man as distinguished as I would know how to divine and to deduce through knowledge, reason and deduction that you stole the goblet?"

Strong words, to say the least. Faced with this aggressive allegation, Yehuda responds (ibid 16):

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“Yehudah said, ‘What shall we say to my master? What can we speak? How can we justify ourselves? God has found the iniquity of your servants. Let us be slaves to my master, both we, and the one in whose hand the goblet was found.’”

On the surface, this seems like an emotional plea on behalf of Binyamin. Yet there is much more to this declaration than meets the eye.

In the first half of the plea, Yehudah asks *“How can we justify ourselves?”* – *“mah nitzதாக?”*

The Talmud (Shabbos 105a) explains that *“nitzதாக”* is an acronym:

We are honest [Nekonim], we are righteous [Zaddikim], we are pure [Tehorim], we are submissive [Dakkim], we are holy [Kedoshim]. ¹

Are Chazal merely telling us an interesting linguistic incidence? Are we to be impressed at the grammatical ingenuity in an acronym emerging from this word?

As we all know, in many cases, there are two ideas contained within an acronym. The first involves the individual words emerging from each letter, and the second involves the word emerging from the combination of all the letters. Whereas the word being enunciated was *“nitzதாக”*, there was an underlying concept being expressed to Yosef. As mentioned above, Yehudah and the brothers were in a very tight spot. They had essentially told Yosef that whoever had the cup deserved death, with the remaining brothers becoming servants to Yosef. Yehudah now needed to find a way to extricate Binyamin from this situation. Yosef’s words went beyond an accusation of stealing. Yosef was portraying the actions of the brothers as an insult to his intelligence. Who were they to think that someone of Yosef’s position and power could somehow be fooled? This was not simply a wrongdoing. Yehudah realized that it was not the crime, but the offense to the ego that was stoking Yosef’s anger (keeping in mind, of course, that Yehudah did not realize the truth about Yosef). As a result, Yehudah had to be very careful in addressing Yosef. If this antagonist sensed any weakness, doubt or indecision in his response to the allegation, Binyamin would be lost. Yehudah understood that when dealing with an adversary in a position of power, especially one more preoccupied with personal affront than objective injustice, it’s imperative to be self-assured, to show no uncertainty. Furthermore, he knew there was no chance a true crime took place here and his confidence in this truth had to be on display. Yehudah’s question of *“how can we justify ourselves,”* was not meant as a statement of submission. The message he was sending to Yosef was that he was confident they had done nothing wrong. There was no actual crime, no malicious attempt to denigrate Yosef – *“we are all righteous,”* was the message he was sending. He projected an air of assurance and control, setting the psychological tone for the conversation.

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This helps clarify the atmosphere Yehudah was trying to establish when addressing Yosef. What about his argument? The Bais Halevi (ibid) offers a fascinating explanation as to the brilliance of Yehudah's plan. Yehudah, when rebutting Yosef's accusation, responds that all the brothers should be slaves, *"both we and the one in whose hand the goblet was found"* – *"gam anachnu, gam asher nimtza hagaviyah beyado"*. Why does Yehudah need to use *"gam"* twice? Why is it necessary to separately mention the brothers and the one in whose bag the cup would be discovered? The Beis Halevi cites a Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 93:3), which quotes a verse from Mishlei (25:11): *"A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver."*

The Midrash explains that just like the apple in the silver, being circular, looks the same from every side, so too Yehudah's words directed at Yosef were *"visible"* on all sides. An example of this, according to the Bais Halevi, involves Yehudah's seemingly repetitive statement to Yosef. Yehudah's first step was to remove the focus on the individual (i.e. Binyamin) in whose bag the cup was found. This meant casting aspersions on all the brothers as one entity, so that whatever took place required complicity by everyone. In doing so, Yehudah was asserting that unless Yosef was ready to accuse them all of collusion, no crime could have been committed. He effectively took the blame off Binyamin's shoulders, diverting Yosef's focus from him. The other *"gam"* presents an even stronger argument as to the unlikelihood of Binyamin being the perpetrator. Why would the person committing the crime place the evidence in his own bag? This would either be an inane robbery attempt, or the crime was committed by one of the other brothers and that person placed the cup in Binyamin's bag to avoid any suspicion. Either way, it made no sense. Thus, according to the Bais Halevi, Yehudah's plan was bring to light the unlikelihood of this crime having been committed by any of them.

This example truly shows Yehudah's talents in properly assessing the situation, his knowledge of psychology, and his ability to present his position in a cogent manner. Yet this does not fully explain the Midrash. What exactly is this comparison of a circular object being seen from all angles and Yehudah's argument? Part of being a great leader is the ability to effectively communicate the message or idea to others. This does not mean just being able to give a great speech. Whereas many politicians and religious leaders are lauded for incredible speaking skills, Moshe Rabbeinu had a clear lisp. Effective communication here refers to the ability to convey the idea and message in a manner that can be understood by all. Yehudah had this trait, expressed both in this instance and in the beginning of next week's parsha. Both to Yosef, the brothers, and even outsiders who may be listening in, the arguments posited by Yehudah rang universally true. To have the truth of a position or idea penetrate emotional resistances and other psychological impediments is the mark of a great leader. The apple looks the same no matter the

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viewpoint of the person. Yehudah's argument, no matter the vantage point, also "looked the same" – it had universal appeal.

Had this powerful person been someone other than Yosef, the story may have ended there. Of course, as we all know, Yosef had a plan, and was guiding the brothers to the point of *teshuva*. As a result, his response to Yehudah indicates his dedication to justice above all. A death sentence for Binyamin was a harsh and hyper-aggressive punishment for a crime that may not have occurred. However, circumstantial evidence merited some type of response – therefore, Binyamin would stay in Egypt. Yehudah, faced with this rational response, resorts to his next plan, as outlined in next week's parsha.

Many turn to the beginning of next week's parsha to see Yehudah at his greatest. Yet before moving to that moment, we have an opportunity to see, in just one verse, how Yehudah merited his role as leader, how he seized the moment and, using his keen knowledge of psychology, exposed the flaw in Yosef's position and asserted their innocence. His ability to seize the moment, projecting an air of surety while faced with a belligerent accusation demonstrated a keen knowledge of psychology. Furthermore, his skill in applying clear rational thinking, exposing the weakness in Yosef's position, is indicative of his leadership qualities. Finally, as we see from the Midrash, Yehudah had a unique ability of to communicate his ideas and thoughts in a manner understood by all. Just one verse – and yet, from this one verse, we access deep and penetrating insights into the mind of Yehudah.