

kol chovevei TORAH

PARSHA PONDERINGS

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Kol Chovevei Torah is a publication of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School. YCT's mission is to professionally train open Orthodox rabbis who will lead the Jewish community and shape its spiritual and intellectual character in consonance with modern and open Orthodox values and commitments.

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Upcoming Events:

Pre-Hanukkah
Lecture
Dec. 11, 2007
7:30pm, NYC
Rabbi Nathaniel
Helfgot on
"Exploring the
Halalakhic, His-
torical and Spirit-
ual Connections
Between Hanuk-
kah and Sukkot"

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All In The Family

By Rabbi Yair Silverman

It is always more alluring to repeat known behavior patterns, even destructive ones, than to strive to create new ones. In particular, expectation set by familial precedents are painfully difficult to abandon. Identifying one child 'chosen' above the rest is an established motif in the Abrahamic dynasty, with the selection of Isaac over Ishmael, and Jacob over Esau. This paradigm continues as the Torah describes Jacob singling out Joseph as beloved, coupled with Joseph's own dreams of his brothers' subservience.

Needless to say, the 'other' brothers are disquieted by the designation as the 'unchosen' ones. When the opportunity arises to expunge Joseph from the family, the brothers deliberate his fate and decide to delay final judgment by throwing him in an empty pit as they go to eat their bread. Judah raises a particular objection to simply killing him, "for he is our brother and our flesh." (Gen 37:27) Notwithstanding the ambiguity of the subsequent narrative, whether the brothers sell Joseph to the Ishmalites or are outmaneuvered by a passing band of bandits and truly believe Joseph to be dead, their brother, their flesh has been abandoned. The brothers present Joseph's blood stained coat asking their father to acknowledge the fate of Joseph, "Ha'ker na" – "please recognize." Jacob responds with the depth of mourning over the loss of his son, his flesh.

The narrative of Joseph's story is interrupted by chapter 38, "And at this time, Judah descends from his brothers and turned away." Judah, who had earlier argued for compassion to Joseph as "our brother and our flesh," responds "at this time" with the decision to disassociate from the collective destiny of his family. Not unlike the 'unchosen' siblings, Esau and Ishmael, who marry local women and establish independent families outside of the Abrahamic covenant, (Gen. 25:12-18 and 36:1-30) Judah moves away, marries a Canaanite woman, establishes a family of three sons and finds a wife, Tamar, for his eldest to marry. In a definitive twist, the eldest son dies and Judah instructs his second son to continue his brother's legacy by marrying Tamar. The second son refuses, knowing that the progeny of this union will belong to his brother and not his own. God killed him as well. After losing 2 of his 3 children, Judah appears likewise to forgo the precept of upholding the cry of his

eldest son by denying Tamar his youngest son and instead banishes her to her father's house. Judah's wife then dies and the vitality of his newly established family is tenuous. It is now that Judah makes another critical transition, choosing the companionship of his 'friend', Hiram the Adullamite, as the two set out for the festival of sheep shearing. Judah's choice to again flee the remaining vestiges of familial responsibility is underscored by the identification of his decision to journey with his 'friend,' Hiram the Adullamite. Hiram is the only 'friend' introduced in the Torah. The friendship serves as a foil to the depth of challenges that Judah faces with his familial relations. Judah invests in this friendship as an alternative social outlet and refuge from his familial struggles.

Upon hearing of his journey with Hiram, Tamar forces Judah to confront his own proclamation of the centrality of family "for he is our brother and our flesh." She veils herself and propositions Judah and he deposits his seal, cloak and staff as collateral. Tamar returns to her father's house and when it becomes known that she is pregnant while still betrothed to Judah's third son, Judah offers a swift judgment ordering her to "be burnt." It is then that Tamar proclaims the same words that the brothers offer to their father Jacob "Ha'ker na - please recognize" – the owner of the seal, cloak and staff. By echoing the brothers asking Jacob to acknowledge the depth of love and loss for his son Joseph, Tamar demands the same from Judah for his abandonment of his son and the mission of pursuing a continuation of his lineage. She calls upon Judah to acknowledge that he has rejected the bounds of family, of covenant, and of community. It is in response to this confrontation that Judah returns to his brothers, reinvests in his relationship with them, and ultimately succeeds in reinforcing the value of what it means to be "our brother and our flesh." It is now that Judah, enabled by Tamar, musters the courage to reconnect with his family, reorient his expectations, refashion his priorities and ultimately shatter the established patterns of behavior and reveal the new paradigm of inclusive peo-ple-hood.

Chanukah is about rededication, about acknowledgment – it's about the courage to acknowledge a new light and kindle it. May we be blessed to recognize our destructive patterns and actualize the courage to embrace transformative change.

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