

Parashat Mikketz

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JUDAH'S LEADERSHIP (1)

Parashat Vayeshev

- Was Reuben party to his brothers' plan to kill Joseph?
- What kind of relationship did the brothers have with Reuben? With Judah?

Parashat Mikketz

- How do the brothers remember their decision to sell Joseph?
- How does Reuben relate to his brothers in this situation?
- How do Reuben and Judah attempt to convince Jacob to send Benjamin with them?
- How does Jacob react to each of their attempts?
- What is the difference between Reuben and Judah?

Parashat Vayigash

- What part of Judah's speech caused Joseph to reveal himself to his brothers?
- What qualities does Judah have that make him fit for leadership?

A. Transferring the Birthright from Reuben to Judah and Joseph

The three *parashot* of *Vayeshev-Mikketz-Vayigash* describe Jacob's sons and the relationships between them. All three of them revolve around the topic of leadership. The book of I Chronicles (5:1-2) summarizes the progression of the leadership as follows:

(1) And the sons of Reuben, firstborn of Israel – for he is the firstborn, and since he defiled his father's sheets his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, son of Israel, and he could not be associated with the birthright; (2) since Judah was the strongest of his brothers, the ruler came from him, and the birthright was given to Joseph.

ובני ראובן בכור ישראל – כי הוא הבכור ובחללו יצויעי אביו נתנה בכרתו לבני יוסף בן ישראל ולא להתיחש לבכרה: כי יהודה גבר באחיו ולנגיד ממנו והבכרה ליוסף. (דברי הימים א ה', א-ב)

These verses describe the birthright being taken from Reuben and given instead to Joseph and Judah. Joseph received the material aspect of the birthright, inheriting a double portion of land¹, while the leadership passed to Judah.²

Why was the birthright taken from Reuben?

1 See Ramban on Gen. 48:22.

2 See Rashi on Gen. 48:2, as well as our lesson on *Parashat Vayeshev*.

According to verse 1, Reuben lost the birthright following his act with Bilha, his father's concubine (Gen. 35:22).³ Once Reuben (Leah's firstborn) lost the birthright, it was transferred to Joseph (Rachel's firstborn).⁴

3 This is how Rashi interprets Jacob's words to Reuben before his death: "Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, the first sign of my strength, excelling in honor, excelling in power. Turbulent as the waters, you will no longer excel..." (Gen. 49:3).

"ויתר שאת" – ראוי היית להיות יתר על אחיך בכהונה, לשון נשיאות כפים. "ויתר עז" – במלכות, כמו (שמואל א ב'): "ויתן עז למלכו". ומי גרם לך להפסיד כל אלה? הפחז והבהלה אשר מהרת להראות כעסך כמים הללו הממהרים למרוצתם. לכן אל תרבה ליטול כל היתרות הללו שהיו ראויות לך.

"Excelling in honor [se'et]" – you were worthy of rising above your brothers as a priest; the word *se'et* refers to *nesi'at kapayim* [raising one's hands in the Priestly Blessing]. "Excelling in power" – in kingship, as it is written: "And he shall give power unto his king" (I Sam. 2:10). And what caused you to lose these? The haste with which you hurried to display your anger, as these waters hurry on their way. Therefore, you shall not be quick to take these additional privileges that were meant for you.

4 The Torah does discuss this exact topic:

כי תהיין לאיש שתי נשים האחת אהובה והאחת שנואה וילדו לו בנים האהובה והשנואה והיה הבן הבכור לשנואה: והיה ביום הנחילו את בניו את אשר יהיה לו לא יוכל לבכר את בן האהובה על פני בן השנואה הבכור: כי את הבכור בן השנואה יכיר לתת לו פי שנים בכל אשר ימצא לו כי הוא ראשית אנו לו משפט הבכרה.

When a man has two wives, one beloved and one despised, and both the beloved and despised wives bear him children, and the eldest is born to the despised wife, on the day when he divides his estate among his sons, he may not favor the son of the beloved wife over his firstborn from the despised wife. For he must acknowledge the firstborn of the despised wife and give him double of everything in his possession, for he is the first of his father's strength, and the right of the firstborn is his. (Deut. 21:15-17)

According to biblical law, the firstborn from the despised wife (in this case, Reuben) takes precedence over the firstborn from the beloved wife (in this case, Joseph). The Torah forbids denying the firstborn of the despised wife his rightful extra

Why is Judah appointed the leader? Here, a different reason is given: “Since Judah was the strongest of his brothers, the ruler came from him.” According to this verse, Jacob gave Judah the leadership role because he was naturally more talented in this area than his brothers, and was most appropriate for the position.⁵

These *parashot* portray two instances of Judah and Reuben’s different approaches to leading their brothers. The first is during **the sale of Joseph** in *Parashat Vayeshev*, which we will discuss below. The second, **accepting responsibility for Benjamin’s welfare**, is divided between *Parashot Mikketz* and *Vayigash* and will be discussed next week.

Considering the leadership styles of Judah and Reuben and the differences between them will allow us to understand why “Judah was the strongest of his brothers” and was ultimately appointed the leader.

portion of inheritance, but it does not prevent the father from transferring the birthright to another son if the firstborn is determined to be unworthy or flawed.

5 Rashi explains:
 אפילו לא חלל ראובן הבכורה ולא נלקחה ממנו, אפילו הכי היה הגון יהודה למלך.
 Even if Reuben had not defiled [his father’s sheets] and the birthright had not been taken from him – even so, Judah was most worthy of becoming king (Rashi on I Chr. 5:2).

B. Reuben’s Failed Leadership of His Brothers

The sale of Joseph is a difficult episode that has significant repercussions for both Jacob’s family and the entire nation of Israel.⁶ All of the brothers participated in this act, but only two are mentioned by name: Reuben and Judah.

The brothers plan to kill Joseph:

And they saw him from a distance, and before he came close to them they plotted against him to kill him. And each man said to his brother, “Behold, here comes the master of dreams. And now, let us go and kill him and throw him into one of the pits, and we shall say that a wild animal has eaten him, and let us see what will become of his dreams.” (Gen. 37:18-20)

וַיִּרְאוּ אֹתוֹ מֵרֶחֶק וּבִטְרָם יִקְרַב אֵלֵיהֶם וַיִּתְנַבְּלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו הֲנֵה בֹעַל הַחֲלֹמוֹת הַלְלוֹהָ בָּא: וְעַתָּה לְכוּ וְנַהַרְגֵהוּ וְנִשְׁלֹכֵהוּ בְּאֶחָד הַבְּרוֹת וְאָמְרֵנוּ חַיָּה רָעָה אֲכָלָתָהוּ וְנִרְאָה מֶה יִהְיֶה חֲלֹמֹתָיו. (בראשית ל"ז, יח-כ)

Reuben’s Immediate Reaction

How do Judah and Reuben, the two “leaders,” react?

6 The Sages saw the sale of Joseph as the source for future disasters that befell the Jewish people, as *Midrash Mishlei* states: “Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: The Ten Martyrs suffered only as a consequence of the sale of Joseph.” Later on, this statement was developed into the *midrash “Eleh Ezkerah.”* For further discussion of the sale of Joseph and its repercussions as perceived by different generations, see Prof. Shulamit Elitzur, *Shira shel Parasha*, p. 72 and onward.

Judah does not react at all at this point, but Reuben hears the brothers' plans and immediately takes action to save Joseph:

And Reuben heard, and he saved him from their hands, and he said, "Let us not fatally strike him" (Gen. 37:21).
 וַיִּשְׁמַע רְאוּבֵן וַיִּצִלְהוּ מִיָּדָם וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא נִכְנֹנוּ (שם, כא)

In this verse, Reuben undoubtedly saves Joseph from certain death. Had it not been for his quick intervention, Joseph would have been killed on the spot.⁷

Reuben Did Not Participate in the Brothers' Conversation

The beginning of the verse includes another important detail: the words "And Reuben heard," indicating that Reuben was not an active participant in the brothers' conversation; he stood on the sidelines and listened. His passiveness is no coincidence – the brothers apparently understood that they would have to hide their plans from Reuben, the eldest, so that he would not prevent them from putting their plan into action. Should Reuben, the eldest, hear of their plan, he would

7 The Sages praise Reuben's quickness to act and note the reward he receives for it:

אמר רבי תנחום בר חנילאי: מפני מה זכה ראובן לימנות בהצלה תחלה (שעייר המקלט שבנחלתו נמנתה ראשונה מבין הערים) – מפני שהוא פתח בהצלה תחלה, שנאמר: "וישמע ראובן ויצילהו מידם".

Rabbi Tanhum bar Hanilai said: For what reason did Reuben merit to be the first to save? (The city of refuge in Reuben's portion of land was the first such city to be established.) Because he acted first to save, as it says: "And Reuben heard, and he saved him from their hands." (*Makkot* 10a)

attempt to stop them from carrying it out.

The Brothers Do Not Listen to Reuben

The brothers plan to kill Joseph, and Reuben says, "Let us not fatally strike him." Do the brothers agree to this? The next verse does not describe any reaction on the part of the brothers; instead, it includes an additional statement from Reuben.⁸ This indicates that the brothers did not listen to Reuben⁹ and that he was forced to approach them again, attempting to persuade them in another way:

And Reuben said to them, "Do not spill blood; throw him into this pit in the wilderness, and do not lay a hand on him," in order to save him from their hands and return him to his father (Gen. 37:22).
 וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם רְאוּבֵן אַל תִּשְׁפְּכוּ דַם הַשְּׁלִיכוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל הַבּוֹר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר בְּמִדְבָּר וְיָד אַל תִּשְׁלְחוּ בוֹ לְמַעַן הִצִּיל אֹתוֹ מִיָּדָם לְהָשִׁיבוֹ אֶל אָבִיו. (שם, כב)

From a Moral Stance to a Practical Alternative

What does Reuben mean by this? First, he attempts to convince the brothers that killing Joseph would be considered a sin on their part ("Do not spill blood"). Second, he offers an alternative: instead of actually killing Joseph, they could throw him into a pit. This

8 For further discussion of the phenomenon of "And he said... And he said," (i.e., quoting a speaker and interposing a further "And he said," in his speech, with no external interruption in between), see Rabbi Elchanan Samet, "*Matai Amar Reuven Le'Echav 'Al Techtav BaYeled' VeHem Lo Sham'u Lo*" in *Iyyunim BeParashot HaShavua* and online: www.etzion.org.il/vbm/archive/5-parsha/10miketz.rtf

9 In our *parasha* Reuben says explicitly: "For did I not tell you, saying, 'Do not sin by the boy,' and you did not listen" (Gen. 42:22). See also Ramban's commentary on Gen. 37:22 and our discussion below.

time, Reuben takes a different approach than his previous attempt to sway them. Now, he is ostensibly in agreement with the brothers regarding the idea of killing Joseph, but he offers a “cleaner”¹⁰ way of going about it. Joseph will die on his own in the pit, and the brothers will gain on both ends: first, Joseph will die; second, the brothers will not be directly responsible for his death, having only indirectly caused him to die, which is not considered the same as actual murder.

Saving Joseph Behind the Brothers' Backs

However, Reuben’s true intentions are to save Joseph from the pit, as the Torah confirms: “In order to save him from their hands and return him to his father.” But when the brothers refuse to listen to him, and he cannot convince them to abandon their plan altogether, he attempts an indirect approach: he seemingly accepts their position and agrees to their idea, but he offers a morally “better” alternative that is still acceptable to them.¹¹ Do the brothers accept

10 A similar notion of keeping one’s conscience clear through indirect murder can be found in the narrative of Saul and David: “And Saul said, ‘**My hand shall not be upon him**; the hand of the Philistines shall be upon him’” (I Sam. 18:17). Rashi explains: “‘My hand shall not be upon him’ – lest I be punished” (Rashi ad loc.).

11 Why doesn’t Reuben take a stand against his brothers? As we will see later on, Reuben’s attempts to save Joseph were not motivated by love or concern for him, but by fear of Jacob’s reaction:

וַיָּשָׁב רְאוּבֵן אֶל הַבּוֹר וְהִנֵּה אֵין יוֹסֵף בְּבוֹר וַיִּקְרַע אֶת בְּגָדָיו: וַיָּשָׁב אֶל אֶחָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלֹל אֵינֶנּוּ וַאֲנִי אֶנְהָ אֲנִי כָּאֵל.

And Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit, and he tore his clothes. And he returned to his brothers and said, “The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?” (Gen. 37:29-30)

Reuben’s grief was not over Joseph’s death, but over his own inevitable conflict with his father. Rashi explains verse 22 in a similar manner: “In order to save him from their hands and return him to **his father**.”

אמר: אני בכור וגדול שבכולן, לא יתלה הסרחון אלא בי.

He said: I am the eldest and the biggest of them all; **he will blame only me for this**.

The *Kli Yakar* is even more extreme in his interpretation:

“וישמע ראובן ויצילו מידם” – לפי שהיה מתירא פן יתלו כל הסרחון בו, כדי שתשוב אליו הבכורה שניטלה ממנו ונתנה ליוסף.

“And Reuben heard, and he saved him from their hands” – for he feared that only he would be blamed. [He saved Joseph] **so that he would be restored the birthright that was taken from him and given to Joseph**.

According to this interpretation, Reuben was not concerned for Joseph’s well-being at all – he was only interested in regaining his birthright. Therefore, he cannot unequivocally oppose the brothers; in the end, he is no different from them with respect to their hatred of Joseph:

וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶחָיו כִּי אָהַב אֹתוֹ אֲבִיהֶם מִכָּל אֶחָיו וַיִּשְׁנְאוּ אֹתוֹ וְלֹא יָכְלוּ דַבְּרוּ לְשָׁלוֹם.

And his brothers saw that their father loved him out of all of his brothers, and they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him (Gen. 37:4).

All of the brothers hated Joseph – including Reuben. Moreover, Reuben is Leah’s firstborn: he gathered mandrakes for her in order to help her become pregnant; he expressed her jealousy (see Rashi on Gen. 35:22, s.v. “And he lay”) and slept with Bilha after Rachel’s death; and now he sees how his father prefers Joseph, the son of his favored wife.

However, other *midrashim* praise Reuben’s behavior during the sale of Joseph:

אמר רבי אלעזר: אמרה לאה, ראו מה בין בני לבן חמי, דאילו בן חמי אף על גב דמדעתיה ובניה לבכירותיה, דכתיב (וימכר את בכרתו ליעקב), חזו מה כתיב ביה: “וישטם עשו את יעקב” וכתיב: “ויאמר הכי קרא שמו יעקב ויעקבני זה פעמים וגו’.” ואילו בני, אף על גב דעל כרחיה שקליה יוסף לבכירותיה מניה, דכתיב: “ובחללו יצועי אביו נתנה בכורתו לבני יוסף”, אפילו הכי לא אקנא ביה, דכתיב: “וישמע ראובן ויצילו מידם.” (ברכות ז ע”ב)

Rabbi Elazar said: Leah said: “See how my son is different from the son of my father-in-law. For the son of my father-in-law [Esau], [although he knowingly sold his birthright, as it is written]: And he sold his birthright to Jacob ‘see what is written’: And Esau hated Jacob ‘and it is written’:

his proposal?

And it was when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped Joseph of his coat, the striped coat that was upon him. And they took him and threw him into the pit, and the pit was empty – there was no water in it. (Gen. 37:23-24)

וַיְהִי כִּאֲשֶׁר בָּא יוֹסֵף אֶל אָחָיו וַיִּפְשְׁטוּ אֶת יוֹסֵף אֶת בְּתֻנְתּוֹ אֶת כְּתֹנֶת הַפָּסִים אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו: וַיִּקְחֻהוּ וַיִּשְׁלְכוּ אֹתוֹ הַבְּרֶה וְהַבּוֹר רֵק אֵין בּוֹ מַיִם. (שם, כג-כד)

The Brothers Ignore Reuben The brothers seem to have accepted Reuben’s idea – they do not kill Joseph; they throw him into a pit, just as Reuben suggested. But the Torah does not say, “And his brothers listened,” or “And they threw him into the pit, as Reuben said.” The verses do not indicate that the brothers paid any attention to Reuben at all. This impression that the brothers ignored Reuben is strengthened by the continuation of the story:¹²

he said” ,For this he is named Jacob] *Ya’akov*], for he has followed me [*vaye’akveni*] me these two times.”” But my son [Reuben], although Joseph took his birthright against his will, as it is written: ‘And since he defiled his father’s sheets his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph,’ even so, he did not envy him, as it is written: ‘And Reuben heard, and he saved him from their hands.’” (*Brachot* 7b)

12 According to the *Siftei Cohen*, the verses hint to the fact that Reuben did not save Joseph entirely from misfortune:

”וישמע ראובן ויצלהו” – חסר, שלא היתה הצלה גמורה. ועוד, ”ויצלהו” – שהיה נצלה מפחדו מהנחשים והעקרבים שהיו בבור.

”And Reuben heard ,and he saved him] *vayatzelehu*” – [the letter *yud*] is missing [from the word “*vayatzelehu*,” written instead as “*vayatzlehu*”), for he did not save him completely. Also, “*vayatzlehu*” – for he recoiled [*nitzla*] out of fear of the snakes and scorpions that were in the pit. (*Siftei Cohen* on Gen. 40:15)

And they sat to eat bread, and they raised their eyes and saw, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their camels carrying spices and balm and myrrh, on the way to Egypt. And Judah said to his brothers, “What will we gain from killing our brother and covering his blood? Let us go and sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let our hand not be upon him, for he is our brother, our flesh,” and his brothers listened. (Gen. 37:25-27)

וַיֵּשְׁבוּ לֶאֱכֹל לֶחֶם וַיִּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם וַיִּרְאוּ וְהִנֵּה אַרְבַּחַת יִשְׁמַעֵאלִים בָּאָה מִגִּילְעָד וּגְמָלֵיהֶם נֹשְׂאִים נְכֹאֵת וּצְרֵי וְלֹט הוֹלְכִים לְהוֹרִיד מִצְרָיִמָּה: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה אֶל אָחָיו מַה בָּצַע בִּי נְהַרְגָה אֶת אָחִינוּ וְכִסִּינוּ אֶת דָּמּוֹ: לָכוּ וּנְמַכְרֵנוּ לְיִשְׁמַעֵאלִים וְנִדְנוּ אֶל תְּהֵי בּוֹ כִּי אָחִינוּ בְּשָׂרֵנוּ הוּא וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אָחָיו. (שם, כה-כו)

As the brothers sit down to eat, Judah, seeing the Ishmaelites, says, “What will we gain from killing our brother?” Apparently, **the brothers are still planning to kill Joseph!**¹³ When they throw Joseph into the pit and sit down to eat, they are still expecting him to die. They have refused to listen to Reuben’s attempts to dissuade them from killing him.

13 Some commentators interpret Joseph’s being thrown into the pit as the act of killing that the brothers are referring to. *HaMizrachi* explains:

”וכסינו את דמו” – ונעלים את מיתתו. לא כסוי דמו ממש, כי לא היתה מיתתו בהריגה עד שיהיה שם דם, אלא השלכתו לבור קרא בשם הריגה.

“And covering his blood” – and concealing his death. Not literally covering his blood, for his killing was not in a manner that would cause blood to be spilled, **but they referred to throwing him into the pit as “killing.”** (*HaMizrachi* on Gen. 37:26)

Joseph's
Fate was
Sealed

Had it not been for Judah's proposal, the narrative might have continued in any one of a number of directions: the brothers could have left Joseph to die in the pit and Reuben would have saved him later, without their knowledge,¹⁴ which could have led to further conflict if the brothers persisted in trying to kill Joseph. Or, the brothers might have waited by the pit to see Joseph die, preventing Reuben from saving him. Alternatively, the brothers could have ensured Joseph's death either directly or indirectly.¹⁵

Why were
Reuben's
Suggestions
Rejected?

Reuben, unable to oppose his brothers, relents. Outwardly, at least, he accepts their position that Joseph should be killed, and merely offers a "cleaner" way to do so. Can the brothers really take his suggestion seriously after he has just backed down from his moral convictions?

14 As our Sages explain (*Midrash Mishlei, parasha 1*), and in accordance with the simple reading of the text.

15 Rabbi Yitzhak ben Asher HaLevi (one of *Ba'alei HaTosafot*) explains:

שראובן אמר להשליכו בבור שלא היו בו נחשים ועקרבים, והיינו דקאמר "השליכו אותו אל הבור הזה", כלומר שאין בו נחשים. והם לא עשו כן, שהשליכוהו בבור אחר שהיו בו נחשים.

For Reuben said to throw him into a pit that did not have snakes and scorpions in it ,as it is written" :Throw him into **this** pit," meaning one that did not have snakes. And they did not do so, as they threw him into a pit that did have snakes. (Rabbi Yitzhak ben Asher HaLevi on Gen. 37:22)

DISTANCE FROM THE BROTHERS AS THE SOURCE OF REUBEN'S FAILURE

In order to understand the cause of Reuben's failure in leadership, let us skip past the sale of Joseph – that was done at Judah's suggestion, without Reuben's knowledge – and examine Reuben's reaction to the realization that "Joseph is gone." This reaction reflects Reuben's failed method of leadership.

And Reuben returned to the pit, וישב ראובן אל הבור
and behold, Joseph was not in ונהנה אין יוסף בבור
the pit, and he tore his clothes. ויקרע את בגדיו:
And he returned to his brothers וישב אל אחיו ויאמר
and said, "The boy is gone, and I, הילד איננו ואני אנה
where shall I go?" (Gen. 37:29-30) אני בא. (שם, כט-ל)

Apparently, Reuben did not sit down to eat with his brothers,¹⁶ and was not present when Joseph was sold. This explains his shock when he returns to the pit in order to save Joseph and finds that Joseph is not there. The fact that Reuben did not join his brothers for their meal indicates his **isolation and distance** from them.

Reuben, as we saw from the beginning of the story, is not "one of the gang." He does not include himself among the rest of his brothers; he does not participate in their conversations or in their meals. While this has a positive side, in that **he is not complicit in their**

16 The sale of Joseph occurred while the brothers sat down to eat, as verse 25 states: "And they sat to eat bread, and they raised their eyes and saw, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites..." (Gen. 37:25).

actions, his distance from them is the reason that his brothers **do not accept his suggestions**.

Irresponsible Disappearance

Furthermore, the fact that Reuben is not with his brothers at this critical juncture is surprising: Reuben is aware that his brothers are planning to kill Joseph, and that his attempts to dissuade them have been in vain. How can he leave the scene at such a crucial point, when one outburst of anger would be enough to lose Joseph?! Where is the responsible behavior expected of the eldest of the brothers, their leader?¹⁷ We would expect Reuben to sit with the brothers and participate in their conversation, in order to learn what their sentiments were. Reuben's disappearance during these critical moments demonstrates that **he did not fully accept his responsibilities**.¹⁸

17 The Sages were also aware of the problematic nature of Reuben's actions, but judged him favorably:

”וישב ראובן אל הבור” - והיכן היה? רבי אליעזר אומר: בשקו ובתעניתו, כשנפנה הלך והציץ לאותו בור, הדא הוא דכתיב: ”וישב ראובן אל הבור”. אמר לו הקב”ה מעולם לא חטא אדם לפני ועשה תשובה ואתה פתחת בתשובה תחלה, הייך שבן בנך עומד ופותח בתשובה תחלה, ואיזה - זה הושע, שנאמר (הושע יד): ”שובה ישראל עד ה’ אלהיך”. (בראשית רבה פ”ד, יט)

“And Reuben returned to the pit” - and where was he? Rabbi Eliezer says: he was wearing sackcloth and fasting, and when he was able he went to peek into the pit, as it is written: “And Reuben **returned** to the pit.” God said to him, “No one has ever sinned before Me and repented, and you are the first to repent; I swear to you, your descendant shall be the first to repent,” and who is this? Hosea, as it says: “Return, Israel, to the Lord your God” (Hosea 14). (*Bereshit Rabba* 4:19)

Still, this is not an entirely satisfactory explanation of why Reuben was absent at such a crucial point.

18 Once again, while the Sages were aware that Reuben's absence was problematic, they judged him favorably:

THE DIFFICULTY OF RECONNECTING

And I, Where shall I Go?

When Reuben returns to the pit and discovers that Joseph is gone, he tears his clothes in grief - but what is he grieving for? “And I, where shall I go?” This is damning indeed: instead of grieving over Joseph's disappearance, Reuben worries about his own fate as the one held responsible for his brothers.

Cover Story - Avoiding Responsibility

How do the brothers react to Reuben's words?

The verses do not mention any reaction on the part of the brothers.¹⁹ Their silence seems to say, “Is that what is bothering you? You can avoid responsibility for this easily.” And indeed, the following verses describe the act of deception intended to relieve them of responsibility: Joseph's coat is dipped in the blood of an animal and sent to their father. The brothers avoid responsibility for their actions by inventing a cover story, inspired by Reuben's attitude: Reuben does not know how to face his father and take responsibility for what happened, so the brothers take action to **remove responsibility from Reuben and from the rest of them**.

”וישמע ראובן ויצילהו” - והיכן היה? רבי יוסי ורבי נחמיה ורבנן, רבי יוסי אומר: כל אחד ואחד מהם היה משמש את אביו יומיו, ואותו היום של ראובן.

”And Reuben heard, and he saved him” - “and where was he? Rabbi Yossi and Rabbi Nehemiah and the Sages [expressed opinions]; [Rabbi Yossi said: Each one of] the brothers [would serve their father on their appointed day, and this day was Reuben's]. (*Bereshit Rabba* 4:15)

19 This is similar to the previous verses, in which the Torah does not state that the brothers listened to Reuben or accepted his words, although they did in practice follow his advice.

**But We
are Guilty
Concerning
Our Brother**

Many years later, the brothers arrive in Egypt to buy food when Joseph is the ruler of Egypt. Joseph acts like a stranger toward them and speaks harshly to them. The Torah recounts a conversation held amongst the brothers, which brings up memories of their selling Joseph:

And each man said to his brother, "But we are guilty concerning our brother; we saw his distress as he pleaded with us and we did not listen, that is why this trouble has come upon us." And Reuben answered them, saying, "Did I not tell you, 'Do not sin by the boy,' and you did not listen, and now his blood must be accounted for." (Gen. 42:21-22)

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו
אֲבָל אֲשָׁמִים אֲנַחְנוּ עַל
אָחִינוּ אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ צָרָתוֹ
נִפְשׁוֹ בְּהִתְחַנְּנוּ אֵלֵינוּ
וְלֹא שָׁמַעְנוּ עָלָיו כִּן בְּאֵה
אֵלֵינוּ הִצָּרָה הַזֹּאת:
וַיַּעַן רְאוּבֵן אֶת־הֶם לֵאמֹר
הֲלוֹא אָמַרְתִּי אֵלֵיכֶם
לֹא תִסּוּ אֶת־הַיָּלֶד בְּיָד
וְלֹא שָׁמַעְתֶּם וְגַם דַּמּוֹ
הַזֶּה נִדְרָשׁ. (בראשית
מ"ב, כא-כב)

Once again, the brothers converse amongst themselves: the phrase "each man said to his brother" is reminiscent of the brothers' first conversation in which they plotted to kill Joseph; that conversation began with an identical phrase. In both cases, the brothers talk amongst themselves, and in both cases Reuben stays on the sidelines, not participating in the conversation, preferring to comment as an outsider.

The brothers remember their sale of Joseph **emotionally**: they mention Joseph's pleas and their cruelty to him. It is not clear how much they actually

regret their decision to sell him, but clearly the picture of Joseph begging for his life and their steadfast refusal to listen was foremost in their minds, as the Ramban explains:

"That we saw his distress as he pleaded with us" – they thought of their cruelty as [deserving] a greater punishment than the fact that they sold him, for he was their brother, their own flesh, begging and pleading with them, and they did not have mercy... (Ramban on Gen. 42:21)

– "אשר ראינו צרת נפשו בהתחננו אלינו" – חשבו להם האכזריות לעונש גדול יותר מן המכירה, כי היה אחיהם בשרם מתחנן ומתנפל לפניהם, ולא ירחמו... (רמב"ן, בראשית מ"ב, כא)

**Reuben is
Not Included**

Did Reuben share his brothers' feelings of guilt?

Reuben's reaction is interesting. First, he does not talk **with** the brothers as equals. His reaction is described thus: "And Reuben **answered them**." Apparently, he is not part of what they are going through. The brothers feel guilty for their cruel behavior toward their brother, Reuben **does not share their feelings of guilt** (after all, he tried to save Joseph and did not participate in the act of selling him). Rather, he stands to the side and says to them: "I **told you so**." Reuben is clearly not feeling guilty at this point; he is only interested in proving that he was right.

Once again, Reuben is isolated from his brothers.

**The Sin –
Murder or
Our Brother’s
Distress?**

It should also be noted that while Reuben emphasizes the wrongness of murder as an **immoral and inhuman act** – “and now his blood must be accounted for”²⁰ – he makes no mention of their **personal connection** to Joseph; Reuben does not use the words “our brother” at all. In contrast, this phrase is used by the rest of the brothers, particularly Judah, whose opposing leadership style is expressed here, as we shall see below.

**Reuben
Admits His
Failure to
Lead**

Another significant point in Reuben’s speech is his accusation of his brothers: “And you did not listen.” Reuben tries to remind his brothers that he was initially opposed to killing Joseph, and that he only suggested throwing him in a pit because they were not willing to listen to him.²¹ While Reuben is attempting to avoid the collective guilt expressed by the brothers (“But we are guilty”), he does implicitly admit to his failure in leadership by mentioning the fact that the brothers were not willing to listen to him.

This, too, highlights the distinction between Reuben and Judah, whose different leadership style ultimately resulted in a different outcome – as the Torah explicitly says regarding Judah, “And his brothers listened.”

²⁰ Reuben even uses the same term used by the Torah in describing the prohibition of murder: “And from each man, too, I shall demand an **accounting** for the soul of his fellow man” (Gen. 9:5).

²¹ See comments of the Ramban and Abarbanel on Gen. 37:22.

C. Judah’s Leadership Strengthens the Fraternal Bond

Returning to the episode of the sale of Joseph, which was done at Judah’s suggestion, let us examine Judah’s relationship with his brothers in order to better understand the differences between Judah’s successful leadership and Reuben’s failed attempt. This will clarify why Judah was chosen out of all of the brothers to replace Reuben as the leader when Reuben was rejected.

**Judah is “One
of the Gang”**

- A. Judah sits down to eat with his brothers, as opposed to Reuben.²² Judah’s way of speaking to his brothers is different than Reuben’s as well. The Torah describes Judah’s speech to his brothers as follows: “And Judah said **to his brothers**” – clearly, Judah is included in the group, and is not an outsider.²³ Judah includes

²² Verses 29-30 imply that Reuben was not with his brothers when the sale took place: “And Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit, and he tore his clothes. And he returned to his brothers and said, “The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?” (Gen. 37:29-30). The following chapters also indicate that Reuben was not aware that Joseph had been sold, and assumed that the brothers had killed him: “And Reuben answered them, saying, “Did I not tell you, ‘Do not sin by the boy,’ and you did not listen, **and now his blood must be accounted for**” (Gen. 42:22).

Reuben is apparently under the impression that the brothers spilled Joseph’s blood (although some commentators interpret this differently; see Rabbenu Bahya ad loc., and by contrast Seforno ad loc.).

²³ The Sages were aware of this point and commented upon it: בג' מקומות דבר יהודה בפני אחיו ועשו אותו מלך עליהם: ויאמר יהודה אל אחיו

Judah
Represents
the Brothers

himself among his brothers, even in their failure.²⁴ Reuben, in contrast, is not included with his brothers: “And each man said to his brother... let us go and kill him” (Gen. 37:19-20); Reuben, the outsider, intervenes “And Reuben heard, and he saved him from their hands” (Gen. 37:21).

- B. Judah’s speech is given in first person plural, indicating that **he includes himself among his brothers**: “What will we gain from killing **our** brother and covering his blood? Let **us** go and sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let **our** hand not be upon him, for he is **our brother, our flesh**” (Gen. 37:26-27). Reuben, on the other hand, speaks in an imperative manner, excluding himself from the group: “**Do not** spill blood; **throw** him into this pit in the wilderness, and **do not** lay a hand on him”²⁵ (Gen. 37:22).

ל"ג, כו); "ויבא יהודה ואחיו" (מ"ד, יד); "ויגש אליו יהודה" (מ"ד, יח). (בראשית רבה פ"ד י"ז)

In three places Judah spoke to his brothers and they made him king over them: “And Judah said to his brothers” (Gen. 37:26); “And Judah and his brothers came” (Gen. 44:14); “And Judah approached him” (Gen. 44:18). (*Bereshit Rabba* 4:17)

24 This is a weak point of Judah’s leadership, which Reuben tried to avoid by distancing himself from the brothers while leading them.

25 In fact, in his first speech to the brothers, Reuben does speak in the first person: “Let **us** not fatally strike him” (Gen. 37:21). He only excludes himself from the group during his second speech. This change may have been a result of the fact that the brothers refused to listen to Reuben the first time. Reuben, disappointed, decided to dissociate himself from the group, instead of attempting to understand why his suggestion was

Financial
vs. Moral
Arguments

- C. Judah begins with the words, “What will we gain from killing our brother?” Rashi explains “What will we gain” as relating specifically to monetary gain, while Ibn Ezra interprets this as meaning “What purpose will it serve?” According to both explanations, Judah is pointing out to the brothers that they have nothing to gain from killing Joseph. Instead, he suggests a more profitable course of action: “Let us go and sell him to the Ishmaelites.” Judah’s suggestion is horrifying: is his decision in favor of selling over murder purely one of profit?! Seemingly, had it been more profitable to kill Joseph, in principle he would have been willing to do so!

Yet at the end, after he has presented the financial argument, Judah does bring up the **moral aspect**:²⁶ “And let our hand not be upon him, for he is our brother, our flesh.” Why does Judah only mention the moral consideration at the end?

Judah is attempting to **persuade** his brothers. Had he begun with moralistic platitudes, this would have repelled his brothers, and they would have refused to listen. Instead, he begins with what they are willing to hear: the practical consideration. Only later does

rejected.

26 See *Divrei HaKtav VeHaKabbala*, which observes a moral message throughout Judah’s speech, not only at the end: “And in my opinion, Judah’s words are a moral rebuke of his brothers and condemn their act of throwing Joseph into the pit” (*Divrei HaKtav VeHaKabbala* on Gen. 37:26).

he bring up the moral aspect, and thus succeeds in convincing the brothers to listen to him.²⁷

Reuben, on the other hand, immediately begins with the moral argument; while there is importance in taking a moral stand, this may have turned off his brothers, making them less open to his suggestion. Later on, in order to save Joseph, Reuben is forced

27 The complexity of Judah's suggestion to his brothers is reflected in the dialogue between Rabbi Tarfon and his students in tractate *Brachot*:

אמרו לו: אלא מפני מה זכה יהודה למלכות? מפני שהציל את אחיו מן המיתה, שנאמר: "ויאמר יהודה [אל אחיו] מה בצע [כי נהרוג]" וכתוב: "לכו ונמכרו לישמעאלים". אמר להן: דיה להצלה שתכפר על המכירה? אלא מפני מה זכה יהודה למלכות? מפני הענוה, שנאמר (מ"ד, לג): "ועתה ישב נא עבדך וגו'".

They said to him: But why did Judah merit the kingship? Because he saved his brother from death, as it says: "And Judah said [to his brothers], 'What will we gain [from killing...]" etc. (Gen. 37:26). And it is written: "Let us go and sell him to the Ishmaelites." He said to them: [Perhaps] this would suffice to atone for selling [Joseph]! But still, why did Judah merit the kingship? Because of his humility, as it says: "And now, let your servant return" etc. (Gen. 44:33). (*Brachot* ch. 4)

Additional rabbinic sources do criticize Judah's suggestion:

רבי מאיר אומר לא נאמר בו צע אלא כנגד יהודה שנאמר: "ויאמר יהודה אל אחיו מה בצע כי נהרוג את אחינו". וכל המברך את יהודה הרי זה מנאץ, ועל זה נאמר (תהלים י, ג) "ויבוע ברך נאץ ה'".

Rabbi Meir said: "Greedy [*Botze'a*]" was only said against Judah, as it says: "And Judah said to his brothers, 'What will we gain [*betza*] from killing our brother?'" (Gen. 37:26). And anyone who blesses Judah hereby spurns [God], and about this it is said: "And he who blesses the greedy spurns God" (Ps. 10:3). (*Sanhedrin* 6b)

Rashi explains:

"כנגד יהודה" – שהיה לו לומר נחזירנו לאבינו, אחרי שהיו דבריו נשמעין לאחיו. "Against Judah" – for he should have said, 'Let us return him to our father,' once his brothers were receptive to his words.

to abandon his moral stance and agree to "indirectly kill" Joseph. Backing down this way is unbecoming of a leader, and the brothers cannot respect Reuben's suggestions.

In order to win people over, it is not enough to express a strong moral stance – one must know how to phrase things so that others will not be resistant to hearing them. Here Judah succeeded, while Reuben failed.

"Our Brother"?! D.

Rereading Judah's speech (verses 26-27), one notices an interesting point: the phrase "our brother" appears twice in reference to Joseph – once at the beginning, when discussing the practical consideration ("What will we gain from killing our brother?"), and once when discussing the moral aspect ("for he is our brother, our flesh"). From the beginning Judah asserts that Joseph is "our brother." This is emphasized at the end of his speech: "For he is our brother, our flesh." Judah adds an emotional element that had not existed until that point, and his words deeply move his brothers.

The Importance of Brotherhood

The word "brother" appears four times in the two verses that recount Judah's speech. In two of these instances, the Torah is describing Judah's relationship with his brothers, and in the other two the word is used by Judah himself to describe the brothers' relationship to Joseph. The fraternal bond apparently

figures strongly in Judah's style of leadership, and it clearly has a positive effect on his brothers. The feeling that Judah is their **partner** causes the brothers to listen to him, and his identifying Joseph as a brother encourages them to see Joseph differently: **he is not their enemy, but their brother.**

From this perspective, Judah's opening with a practical, financial consideration is clearly **tactical**, and is not because he truly considers it to be of greater importance.

Reuben, as mentioned above, does not attempt to evoke any feelings of brotherhood at all. He does not call Joseph "our brother." **He is just as removed from Joseph as he is from the rest of his brothers,**²⁸ and his speech in favor of saving him is **moral, but devoid of feeling.**²⁹ Such a speech could never succeed in convincing his brothers.

28 See note 10.

29 Reuben's indifference toward Joseph might be related to his idealistic, impersonal approach to the prohibition of murder in general. The Ramban writes:

וכאשר ראה שלא שמעו לעזבו, אמר להם – אם בן אל תשפכו דם בידכם. ולא אמר "דמו", כי הראה עצמו שלא יאמר בן לאהבתו, רק שלא יהיו שופכים דם, לימד אותם שאין עונש הגורם כעונש השופך דם בידיו.

And when he saw that they would not leave him, he said to them, 'In that case – do not spill blood with your own hands.' He did not say 'his blood,' for he wanted to show that **he was not speaking out of love for [Joseph], but rather against murder**, teaching them that there was no punishment [as severe] as for one who spills blood with his own hands.

E. Ultimately, it is Judah's suggestion that is accepted by his brothers – a point that is emphasized by the Torah: "And his brothers listened" (Gen. 37:27), in direct contrast to their disregard of Reuben's suggestion as discussed above.

D. Interim Summary

The story of the sale of Joseph, as depicted in *Parashat Vayeshev*, and as recalled by Joseph's brothers years later in Egypt, demonstrates Reuben's and Judah's contrasting leadership styles as they attempt to save Joseph.

Reuben is first to react, and his immediate intervention saves Joseph from certain death. Still, it is clear that the brothers are not interested in listening to him; he himself recognizes this, saying, "Did I not tell you, 'Do not sin by the boy,' and you did not listen, and now his blood must be accounted for" (Gen. 42:22).

Judah's leadership, on the other hand, does not come about instantaneously, but grows out of his brothers' affinity and esteem for him. This also made Judah's suggestions that much more convincing to his brothers than Reuben's.

Judah's charisma and persuasive style stem from the way he relates to his brothers, which is very different than the way Reuben relates to them. Reuben was distant and detached from his brothers, while Judah included himself among them, and thus had a stronger influence on them. The bond between Judah and his brothers allows him to inspire them to feel the same way towards Joseph.

The centrality of Judah's closeness with his brothers will be discussed in greater detail in our next lesson

on *Parashat Vayigash*. We shall summarize Judah's unique leadership qualities that led to his becoming "the strongest of his brothers" and being chosen to replace Reuben in the role of leader.