

Vayeshev – Jewish Renewal

Our Sedra this week is replete with some of the most potent and potentially destructive forces that we human beings have to deal with. Not only do we have sibling rivalry but we also find an expression of the toxic aspects of selfish drives when it comes to forging marital and family relationships.

In the middle of the account of Yosef, the Torah abruptly turns its attention to one of several Shidduch stories of the Abrahamic period which is both descriptive and informative, but sadly this one does not work out well. In summary, Yehuda leaves the family clan, finds a wife, has children, the children marry, but then it all starts to go very wrong. First, tragedy strikes with Yehuda's oldest son dying, then his second son dies, then Yehuda's wife dies, and ultimately Yehuda himself has a highly unusual and seemingly inappropriate joining with Tamar (who had been married to his sons). A very strange and unfortunate set of events to say the least.

There is a great deal to expound here, but we will focus on just two very crucial Pasukim/verses. At the start of this narrative we are told that:

“...Yehuda **went down** from his brothers and **turned away** unto an Adullamite man...Yehuda **saw** the **daughter of a prominent merchant**... and he married her.”

A close reading and analysis of these verses provides strong clues as to the recipe for disaster that struck Yehuda and his family.

Yehuda went down from his brothers – he left their way of life, their good practices, he dropped in his greatness;

[he] turned away – he found a new set of values, those of the Adullamite man, not the path of the Avos;

Yehuda saw – he came across beauty, on which he placed too much importance;

the daughter of a prominent merchant – she was wealthy, upon which he also placed too much importance.

Yehuda allowed himself to drop from the central role he had amongst the brothers, to a man who focussed inappropriately on wealth and beauty (Midrash Rabba, Rashi, Ramban, Daas Zekeinim, Ohr Hachaim, and Malbim). The Torah emphasises these issues in relation to how he

proceeded in choosing a spouse. We later find Yehuda choosing a wife for his son, and following the sons' obsession with beauty they also die (Rashi). This suggests a continuation of these negative traits - the apple does not fall from the tree as it is often said. The premature death of Yehuda's sons powerfully drives home the futility of this approach. Yehuda was a great man, with great lineage, but it is still possible to lose one's way and be overrun by desire for superficial pleasures of wealth and beauty. It is this danger that lurks inside all of us, that the Torah wishes to warn us about.

These mistakes become even more pronounced when compared to the two prior descriptive Shidduch stories that we have already seen in the Torah, that of Yitzchak and Rivka, and Yaakov and Rachel. Such care and attention was taken to ensure their spouses came from the right families and that they had the fine qualities needed to join in partnership with the Avos. The Torah spends countless Pasukim mapping out these partnerships and of course this is where Yehuda went so dreadfully wrong. He was adrift from his family, and susceptible to temptations that feel good but if mishandled, ultimately bring us away from Truth and long term happiness. These tests remain with humanity, and the Torah demands of us to stop and consider our life decisions and ensure we do not allow ourselves to be led astray. This particular struggle is a nuanced one however, as the Torah clearly does give significance to beauty and wealth but only when channelled correctly.

Perhaps however there is an even more profound message here – Yehuda's return to favour. After his embarrassment from the incident with Tamar, eventually he seems not only to learn his lesson, but to play a crucial role in the dialogue with Yosef and the protection of his brother Binyamin. We also know that the union with Tamar is said to be the start of the Messianic line and further still the very name by which we are called – Jews, ie Yehudim, is Yehuda's namesake – what could be more of a privilege. If Yehuda could lose his way, then we can too, but more importantly our very name symbolises our vision of hope, return and renewal to the paths of Truth and eternal ways. There is hope for us all.