

Vayigash: Measure for Measure

- Nisson Shulman.

Yehuda changes suddenly, from accepting the punishment in last week's parsha, to an attitude of confrontation before Joseph. Why? Example of three advisors of Pharaoh, Bilaam, Job, Jethro. Yehuda perceived that the punishment Joseph was ready to inflict was not measure for measure for their sin. If so, he must confront the injustice and rectify it.

VAYIGASH: MEASURE FOR MEASURE

(Parsha study; culled from several sources, including the writings of Avi Mori, Rav Moshe Yitzchok Shulman zt"l)

1. Rashi, indicates that far from apologizing for the theft of Joseph's cup, Yehuda was actually reprimanding Joseph for the way with which they had been treated. The Midrash goes even further, saying Yehuda drew close for battle to engage Joseph in confrontation.
2. This seems remarkably different from the tone of Yehuda at the end of last week's parsha, where it is clearly a tone of desperation: apologetic, confessional. VAYOMER YEHUDA, MA NOMAR LAADONI, MA NEDABER UMA NITZTADAK. VEHAELOKIM MATZA ET AVON AVADECHA, HINENU AVADIM LAADONI, GAM ANACHNU, GAM ASHER NIMTZA HAGAVIA BEYADO. He is altogether willing to suffer the consequences for the stolen cup!! And yet in this week's parsha, right at the beginning, Yehuda's tone changes entirely! Why?
3. Rav Eliyahu Lopian explains that the brothers perceived that the predicament in which they found themselves – the entire denouement – was a divine retribution for their sale of Joseph into slavery many years ago. As we find in Miketz – VAYOMRU ISH EL ACHIV, AVAL ASHEMIM ANACHNU, AL AHINU, ASHER RAINU TZARAS NAFSHO BEHITCHANENO ALEYNU VELO SHAMAANU, AL KEN BAA ALEYNU HATZARA HAZOT.
4. It is noteworthy that their guilt was most strongly felt, not because of the sale of Joseph, but more for being insensitive to his cries for mercy. We, as sons of Jacob, should not have been able to go ahead with the plan to sell him even were it to have been justified, when Joseph's plight was clearly demonstrated to us. How could we turn a deaf ear to our own flesh and blood brother when he was in this pitiful condition, and when he pleaded with us for his life?
5. And Reuben takes up the same note when he declares to his brothers, "Did I not tell you not to sin against the boy? And you did not listen and his blood is now being sought!" Reuben talks about Joseph as a YELED, a boy, someone young and defenseless, in keeping with the brothers' blaming themselves for their past insensitivity to Joseph.
6. There is a remarkable Midrash dealing with a similar theme. It tells us that Pharaoh convened a special meeting with his three top counselors to discuss a so-called "Jewish problem". The men were put into forced labor, slave camps, and robbed of their basic freedom. The women bore children and had them snatched away and thrown into the walls their to be immured, or into the

Nile. How did this plan evolve?

The Midrash tells us that there were three counselors who were sought after by Pharaoh for advice: Yitro, Bilaam and Iyov. Bilaam agreed with the plan. He was punished when Moses killed him in the desert war. Yitro protested, but when he saw that Pharaoh was set on carrying out his plan and that his own life was in danger, fled in order not to participate. He risked his life by protesting, and then by fleeing in order to avoid becoming a participant. The Midrash tells us that because he fled he was rewarded with the great son-in-law, Moshe Rabenu. However, says the Midrash, Iyov was silent. His measure for measure punishment was that he was physically afflicted.

7. Rav Chaim Shmulevitz explained: We understand the great reward Yitro merited. The death of Bilaam is also justified, and is measure for measure for his desire to destroy the Jewish people. But how do we understand the nature of Job's punishment? How is this MIDA KENEGED MIDA?

8. Because when Iyov heard the anguished cries of mothers, fathers and children, he decided to remain silent. True, he would not become a participant, but why should he run away when fleeing would make no difference whatsoever in the outcome? Why should he risk his life? Apparently Iyov was not sufficiently affected by the cries to cause him to risk his life by crying out in protest or at least running away... So he was afflicted physically. Iyov, why do you cry out in your affliction? Crying out won't help! Why do you cry? You cry out because you can't help it!!! If you really were affected by the affliction of the Jews, you couldn't help but cry out....

9. Thus Yehuda realized that the brothers' predicament was the direct result of their being deaf to the misery of Joseph, and now their turn to cry out had come.... So Yehuda offered to take Benjamin's place as a slave, and in his mind he thought this would be a fitting punishment for MEHIRAT YOSEPH. It would be MIDA KENEGED MIDA. He was ready to submit to this judgment.

10. But in the last pasuk of the previous portion Joseph said, "No, the one who stole the cup shall be my slave, and you go up in peace to your father." Once Yehuda heard this, he realized that this could not have been part of God's punishment for MECHIRAT YOSEPH, since Benjamin was innocent, and here he is being threatened with slavery and the guilty brothers are going free! Thus Yehuda rose from his passivity and said what he did.

11. Joseph was testing the brothers to see if the brothers would remain silent while Benjamin is falsely accused. Yehuda realizes his protest cannot accomplish much against the forces of Egypt, which Joseph commands. But he cannot help it. He cannot remain silent, and thus he atones for the sin of neglecting the cries of Joseph. And then Joseph is prepared to reveal his true identity to the brothers.