

Parsha Ponders

Vayeishev | December 11, 2020 | 25 Kislev 5781

Why we are called Jews¹

יהודה אתה יודוך אחיך וגו'

Yehudah, your brothers will admit to you²

In a few weeks' time, we'll read Yaakov's blessings to his kids in *parshas Vayechi*. The blessing given to Yehudah is that "your brothers will admit to you". This is somewhat of a play on words, as the name Yehudah has the same root as the word מודה, to admit. What this blessing is referring to is elucidated by Targum "Yonasan"³. The blessing is that since Yehudah admitted his collusion with the incident with Tamar, the descendants of Yaakov will all be called by Yehudah's name. The word Jew, or *Yehudi*, comes from the word Yehuda. What was the incident with Tamar, and why was it so meritorious for Yehudah that for thousands of years there would be a nation called the Jewish people?

In this week's parsha, Yehudah's daughter-in-law Tamar was widowed from two of Yehudah's sons. The expectation was for her to marry Yehudah's third son, Shela. However, when the latter came of marriageable age, he wasn't offered to her. She felt like she was trapped, as she couldn't have the children she so desperately wanted. She decided to disguise herself, dress up like a harlot, and seduce her father-in-law Yehudah. He was fooled, and she became pregnant. When it was discovered that she was expecting, Yehudah had her arrested and tried for being intimate with someone outside the family. When she hinted to Yehudah that he was the father, he realized what had happened. She had no evidence, and he could have kept quiet. Instead, he admitted to everyone that she had acted properly. He embarrassed himself publicly to spare her from undeserved punishment.

Another possible scandal in this week's *parsha* is with Yosef. He was sold as a slave to the head of the Egyptian Butchers named Potiphar. Potiphar's wife had a strong liking to Yosef, and consistently tried to seduce him. Even though he was only a teenager, and Potiphar's wife's efforts knew no end, Yosef held his ground. He knew it was morally wrong for him to commit adultery with her. His refusal upset her greatly, and in the end, she framed him for commit adultery with her. He was promptly thrown in jail for over ten years.

Our Sages tell us⁴ that because Yosef sanctified the name of G-d in private, by not succumbing to Potiphar's wife's advances, he had a letter of Hashem's name added to his own⁵. However, Yehudah, who sanctified the name of Hashem in public, by admitting his mistake in arresting Tamar, has the entire four-letter name of Hashem within his own⁶. Hashem usually rewards and punishes based on the mode

¹ Based on a *devar Torah* heard from Rav Nochum Salb of Yeshivas Ner Yisroel in 5779. May this *devar Torah* serve as a *zechus* for a *Refuah Sheleimah* for the *Menahel* of Ner Yisroel, HaRav Sheftel Neuberger shlita (Sheftel Meir HaLevi ben Chaya Yehudis)

² Genesis 49:8. This verse is from *parshas Vayechi*

³ *Ad. loc.* It says similarly in Targum Yerushalmi ad. loc. The source seems to be a combination of Midrash Tanchuma Vayechi § 10, which mentions the incident with Tamar, and Bereishis Rabbah 98:6, which mentions the descendants of Yaakov being named after Yehudah

⁴ Sotah 36b. The part about Yehudah also appears in *ibid* 10b

⁵ יהוסיף, as we see in Psalms 81:6

⁶ It makes sense that after the incident with Yosef, a letter was added, but Yehudah was called from birth by that name. The Maharsha ad. loc. s.v. כולו נקרא explains that Hashem knew the future, and inspired Leah to call him Yehudah, since he will sanctify Hashem's name in the future

of *middah keneged middah*, measure for measure⁷. What's the connection between sanctifying Hashem's name, and having letters of Hashem's name within one's own name?

Hashem told us that during the Exodus He carried us on the wings of eagles⁸. Rashi explains⁹ that this is a metaphor for how an eagle protects her children. Most birds are afraid of predators, so they carry their children in the claws of their feet. An eagle, who knows no equal in the skies, isn't afraid of predators. However, they do fear arrows being shot at them by humans. As such, they carry their children on their back. The eagle thinks: "Better I get hit by the arrow than my child". This is how Hashem so-to-speak protected the Jews from the Egyptians. He put a cloud pillar between them and the Egyptians¹⁰. As the latter flung arrows and catapulted boulders, the cloud¹¹ absorbed them. What's the comparison though? When the arrow hits the eagle, it's actually hurt. But when Hashem's cloud absorbed the projectiles, He obviously wasn't hurt!

The comparison is that the Egyptians thought they were actually hurting Hashem! As ridiculous as that sounds, that could've been a tremendous *chillul Hashem*, desecration of Hashem's name and sanctity. Nevertheless, Hashem allowed that to happen in order to protect His people. We see from here that Hashem is willing to forgo His honor for His children.

This is exactly what Yehudah did. His father and grandfather were on the jury to prosecute Tamar¹². All of his comrades and acquaintances may have been there to witness the trial. It would have been very embarrassing to admit that he impregnated his daughter-in-law, whom he had arrested for illicit relations.

Even so, Yehudah was willing to forgo his honor and embarrass himself publicly, to do the right thing. This is what it means that he sanctified Hashem's name in public. Since he was directly emulating his Creator, who also forwent His honor, he merited to have Hashem's four-letter name of Hashem. In this merit, we're called Yehudim, Jews.

Good Shabbos and have a *lichtege* Chanukah!

⁷ The concept of *מדה כנגד מדה* is mentioned in [Nedarim 32a](#). This concept seems to be the same as *במדה שאדם* [למודד בה מודדין לו](#) ([Sotah 1:7](#))

⁸ [Exodus 19:4](#)

⁹ *Ad. loc.*

¹⁰ [Exodus 14:19,20](#)

¹¹ [Rashi](#) says it was the cloud, but the verse in Chapter 14 also says there was an Angel that Hashem put between the two nations, and [Rashi ad. loc.](#) sounds like it was the Angel which absorbed the Egyptian projectiles

¹² [Tanchuma Yashan Vayeishev](#) § 17. See [Torah Sheleimah](#) to [Genesis](#) Chapter 38 § 98 who brings sources who discuss if it's possible to infer from this *Midrash* that it says Shem the son of Noach was also there (which he couldn't have been, since he had passed away years earlier)