YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**Parashat Vayechi**

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**Dedicated by Rav Yitzchak and Stefanie Etshalom**

**in memory of Rabbanit Miriam Wise *z”l* – 9 Tevet**

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**The Responsibility Assumed by Yehuda**

Summarized by Shmuel Fuchs

Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction: The Virtue of Yehuda**

When Yaakov blesses his twelve sons at the end of his life, two of the blessings stand out in particular: those of Yehuda and of Yosef. Most of the blessings either consist of only one or two verses, or, in the blessings to the first three sons, Yaakov speaks at greater length and rebukes them for their actions. The blessings of Yehuda and Yosef are different in that, on the one hand, they are long and detailed, while on the other hand, they contain not a single word of criticism.

As for the blessing given to Yosef, there is no great surprise here, for we know Yosef is Yaakov's most beloved son. But it is not clear why Yehuda merited such a blessing; after all, there was no indication until now that he was particularly favored by Yaakov.

**Rashi’s Approach**

In his commentary to the verse: "Yehuda is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you are gone up; He stooped down, he crouched as a lion, and as a lioness; who shall rouse him up?" (*Bereishit* 49:9), Rashi comments on the words, "from the prey, my son, you are gone up," and describes two things for which Yehuda merited his special blessing:

“From the prey” – From [the deed of] which I suspected you when I said (*Bereishit* 37:33): "Yosef is torn in pieces"…

“My son, you are gone up” – You withdrew [from that murderous deed], saying (*Bereishit* 37:26): "What profit is it if we slay our brother." And similarly when Tamar was condemned to death, for he acknowledged (*Bereishit* 38:26): "She is more righteous than I." (Rashi, *Bereishit* 49:9)

Yaakov praises Yehuda for his conduct in two incidents: the sale of Yosef and the incident involving Tamar. But this interpretation is difficult: it is not at all clear whether Yaakov knew about the sale, and Rashi and the Ramban disagree on the matter. Moreover, even if we assume that he knew about the sale, why does he not refer to Reuven's involvement? A similar question also arises in connection with the story of Tamar; there too, it is not at all clear whether Yaakov was aware of everything that happened.

**Another Suggestion**

Because of these difficulties, I will suggest something else that made Yehuda stand out prominently as a fitting leader of his brothers, which will help us understand why Yehuda received his blessing: the guarantee that he gave for his brother Binyamin.

While still in the land of Israel, Yehuda accepted responsibility for Binyamin, so the brothers could once again go down to Egypt to acquire food: "I will be surety for him; of my hand shall you require him; if I bring him not to you, and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever" (*Bereishit* 43:9). So too when Binyamin became entangled in the goblet plot, Yehuda fought to return the boy to his father – to the point that he even offered to stay as a slave in his place.

This is not at all a simple decision. Yehuda has a family and children, and being a lifelong slave to the Egyptian ruler would have meant a complete relinquishment of his previous world – but for the sake of Binyamin, regarding whom he had committed to take charge and to return him to the land of Israel, assuming personal responsibility and maintaining the guarantee are the highest values.

This quality is also evident in the incident involving Tamar, to which Rashi referred. Without going into the full details of the story, it seems that Yehuda committed one major sin – not his fornication, and not even his marriage to a Canaanite in the first place (his first wife, Bat Shua), but rather the fact that he left Tamar as a deserted wife and denied the necessity to establish a "name" for his deceased sons. The whole point of the mitzva of *yibbum*, levirate marriage, is mutual responsibility; it is the brother's obligation to establish the name of his deceased brother by giving up one of his own children (to be named after the deceased). This is a difficult challenge, and indeed initially Yehuda showed no concern and refrained from worrying about Tamar, saying in his heart, "let her remain single until her hair turns gray."

But in the end, he had a change of heart. When Yehuda declared, "She is more righteous than I" (*Bereishit* 38:26), he assumed responsibility for his actions and saved his daughter-in-law from death, thus proving his ability to repair previous sins and mistakes by taking personal responsibility for himself and making a full confession. Therefore, he merited his special blessing.

**King David and the Removal of the Plague**

We find the very same thing in King David, the first to fulfill the verse: "The scepter shall not depart from Yehuda" (*Bereishit* 49:10):

So the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning even to the time appointed; and there died of the people from Dan even to Beer-Sheva seventy thousand men. And when the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it… And David spoke to the Lord when he saw the angel that smote the people, and said: Lo, I have sinned, and I have done iniquitously; but these sheep, what have they done? Let Your hand, I pray You, be against me, and against my father's house. (II *Shmuel* 24:15-17)

A leader's ability to admit his mistake and accept full responsibility, based on a sense of responsibility for the fate of the rest of the people, saved us in the days of David from the plague. May we succeed to bear the responsibility that lies before us, and in that way merit that God will save us from the current epidemic.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Medan on Shabbat *Parashat Vayechi* 5781.]