Reuven’s Singular Role

Reuven’s Misdeed

Following the death of Leah, Reuven, her eldest son, responds in dramatic and, ostensibly, disturbing fashion. “Reuven went and lay with Bilhah” (35:22). According to Rashi, Reuven did not actually commit this infraction in the literal sense. Rather this is what transpired: “When Rachel died, Yaakov took his bed which was placed regularly in the tent of Rachel...and placed it in the tent of Bilhah. Reuven came and resented the insult to his mother and said, ‘If my mother was subordinate to Rachel, must she also be subordinate to Rachel’s handmaid?’ Therefore, he rearranged Yaakov’s bed by moving it to Leah’s tent” (Rashi, 35:22).

Undermining Yaakov’s Authority

Rabbi Soloveitchik, commenting on this embarrassing incident, posited that Reuven’s act was not only a serious transgression in its own right but it had devastating consequences. Reuven’s lack of respect toward his father undermined Yaakov’s authority in his own household. The ensuing loss of respect for Yaakov trickled down among his brethren. Reuven undermining Yaakov’s authority played out even more seriously with the sale of Yosef. Reuven’s disregard for his father’s feelings and for his father’s jurisdiction in the home opened the door for the brothers to brazenly act as they did with the sale of Yosef.¹

Yaakov/Yisrael

The Rav detected a startling hint to this notion in the wording of the pasuk regarding Reuven’s transgression of switching the beds. Strangely, the pasuk transitions abruptly, first employing the name Yisrael (twice) and then Yaakov. A single pasuk employing both names is perplexing.

Rabbi Soloveitchik taught that the name Yisrael represents the free, powerful Jew, while Yaakov is the name which represents the Jew in a state of subservience. Therefore the pasuk pivots. Prior to Reuven’s sin

¹ Even according to the commentaries that claim that the brothers had convened a court and found Yosef guilty and deserving of the punishment of death, the brothers were guilty of not conferring with their father and turning to their elder for guidance and direction. (M’ipneinei Harav, Schachter p. 280)
Yaakov was respected and commanded the honor he deserved. However, Reuven’s sin and disrespect changed that. Moreover, Reuven’s sin set in motion a series of events leading to Yosef’s sale and the exile to Egypt. The Rav taught: “Reuven’s actions altered a historical trajectory that was to be victorious, as represented by the name Yisrael, to one of servitude and dependence, as represented by the name Yaakov” (Mesorat HaRav Chumash, Lustiger, p. 265).

The Ramifications of Reuven’s Sin

We shed even more light on Reuven’s role by examining his behavior at the time of the sale of Yosef. Strangely, during the actual sale of Yosef, Reuven was not present. Where was he? Rashi quotes the answer found in the midrash: “Rabbi Eleazar said: He was taken up with fasting and sackcloth, and when he became free he went and looked into the pit.” (B’reishit Rabbah 37:19)

Concerning which transgression was Reuven engaged in repentance? It is referring to the misdeed he committed earlier by ‘moving the bed of his father.’ But why, asks Rabbi Soloveitchik, did Reuven choose this specific occasion to repent for that earlier act? The Rav, brilliantly suggested, because only now did Reuven finally recognize the staggering implications of his sin. After the brothers witnessed Reuven acting in a disrespectful manner toward their father in the Bilhah incident, their own respect for Yaakov declined. Therefore, after hearing their threat to kill Yosef, ‘He [Reuven] was taken
up with his fasting and sackcloth.’ His earlier sin had broader implications.

**Loss of Stature**

Sadly, Reuven’s awful misstep impacted on his loss of eminence. As the eldest child, Reuven’s destiny was to attain both ‘kingship’ and ‘priesthood’. Yaakov, however, perceived that Reuven’s personality was not suited for either position (B’reishit 49:4). Yaakov criticized Reuven’s haste and impulsiveness. He was “unstable as water.” Spilled water runs every which way. Reuven’s decisions were rash. A king or leader requires measured, deliberate and appropriate action under pressure. The Rav suggested that retreating into mourning and sackcloth at the critical moment of the sale of Yosef was a mistake. He should have protected Yosef (Mesorat HaRav, B’reishit, Lustiger p.358).

**‘The Sons of Yaakov Were Twelve’**

Nevertheless, a matter of prime importance must be emphasized regarding Reuven’s character and position within the family unit: Reuven never loses his place within the family of Israel. The very verse which describes his transgression concludes with the phrase “…the sons of Yaakov were twelve” (35:22). Although Yaakov was aware of what Reuven had done, the Torah indicates that Yaakov did not banish or disinherit Reuven. To the contrary, despite the sin that caused him to lose the privileges of the firstborn (49:4), not only was he not rejected, he continued to be listed first among his brothers (Ramban, Sforno).

This fact that Reuven retains his standing as one of the illustrious children of Yaakov and father of a tribe of Israel is reiterated and reinforced at the time of Yaakov’s death. Not only is he offered the first blessing but at the conclusion of Yaakov’s blessings the Torah emphasizes, “All these are the tribes of Israel - twelve- and this is what their father spoke to them and he blessed them; he blessed each according to his appropriate blessing.” (49:28). The Torah reiterates the point made in 35:22, that there were twelve tribes.

**Moshe’s Concern**

At the end of the book of Devarim as the Torah comes to a close the misconduct of Reuven appears to still be hovering over his personality. When Moshe offers his final blessings to each tribe, he addresses the tribe of Reuven with a striking expression: “May Reuven live and not die, and may his population be included in the count.” What is the meaning of this phrase? Apparently there was still a concern that Reuven find his rightful place among his brothers, the tribes of Israel. According to Rashi, Moshe’s intent is that Reuven merit a place in the world to come - ‘...and not die’ - although he transgressed with the episode of Bilhah (Rashi 33:6).

**Safeguarding His Place**

Considering the serious nature of Reuven’s transgression, how does one justify the
fact that he maintained his coveted role among the tribes? In the words of Moshe, every tribe is essential, including Reuven: "Yachad Shivtei Yisrael" - “The tribes of Israel in Unity” (Devarim 33:5).

**A Model for ‘Baalei Teshuva’**

A penetrating answer is suggested by Rabbi Moshe Wolfson shlit’a, Mashgichah Ruchani of Mesivta Torah V’daat in his work ‘Tzion Ve’areha’ (pp. 21-22). He cites an exquisite midrashic teaching (B’resheit Rabbah, Parshat Vayeshev, 84:19): “God said to Reuven, ‘Up until now, no one ever sinned in my presence and then did penance after sinning. As a reward, one of your descendants will be the first in his generation to do penance. And who was that person, Hoshea the prophet, as it is written, “Return O Israel” (Hoshea 14:2).

As is well known, Hoshea’s prophecy opens with the words, “Return O, Israel, unto the Lord thy God; for you have stumbled in your iniquity (14:2). This prophecy was chosen as the haftarah for Shabbat Shuva, on the last Shabbat before Yom Kippur. Hashem rewarded Reuven by placing the prophecy of Teshuva on the lips of his descendant.

Rabbi Wolfson cites a Chassidic teaching from the ‘Pri Tzaddik’ who posits that the sin of Reuven is made public by the Torah because Reuven is a role model for all baalei teshuva. All who seek to return from their mistakes and missteps can look toward Reuven as a paradigm of repentance.

The episode of the sale of Yosef is one of the most tragic events of the Torah. What was Reuvens’s role in this narrative? It must be noted that Reuven opposed his brothers. Although he could not protect Yosef openly against his brothers, he hoped to be able to find a way to save him. When the Torah reports that Reuven returned to the pit to save his brother Yosef, the Torah employs the word ‘va’yashav’: “Va’yashav Reuven el habor...” (37:29). The same word is employed a second time in the following verse, ‘va’yashav el echav...” Surely the choice of this word has deeper significance. The word va’yashav contains the same word as teshuva, repentance. Apparently, the Sages saw in this word the hint to revealing Reuven’s true legacy. Namely his efforts to repair and make amends.