



## PROBING THE PROPHETS

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# The Burden of Leadership

Parashat HaShavua this week is, perhaps, the most painful and troubling one in all of Sefer Breshit. Reading about the dissolution of Ya'akov's family — the sibling rivalries that had the brothers throw Yosef into a pit, which led to his enslavement and to the patriarch's unending grief — is a somber exercise, no matter how many times we revisit the saga.

Interestingly, the departure of Yehuda from his family soon after the sale of Yosef, part of the “unraveling” of the family, was seen by Chazal as a penalty for his failure to prevent the brothers from harming their younger sibling. This well-known statement of Chazal [see Shmot Rabbah 42:3] has always disturbed me. It was Yehudah, after all, who **succeeded** in convincing the brothers **not** to kill Yosef. It was he, therefore, who **saved** the life of Yosef. Why then, would Chazal point to Yehudah as the one who was punished for the brothers'

crime when, in fact, it was he who should have been **rewarded** for his actions??!!

In a fascinating analysis of our haftarah [Amos 2:6 – 3:8], Rav Moshe Lichtenstein turns to the opening words of the selection as the key in understanding the ancients' dismay in the behavior of Yehuda. After harshly condemning the sinful ethos and immorality of Israel's neighbors (including the Kingdom of Yehuda), the prophet calls out Shomron for her misdeeds:

***“They sell the righteous for silver - and the poor for a pair of shoes. They yearn that the dust of earth be on the head of the poor - and twist the way of the humble”***

Rav Lichtenstein sees in the words of Amos that the corruption of the Northern Kingdom was more than immoral acts, but as a reflection of the attitude that was prevalent within the upper class - a depraved attitude toward the oppressed, the indigent and the needy. He sees the arrogance of the leadership and the elitists as more than a lack of regard and derision toward their brethren, but considering them as objects of manipulation. They did not see the general public as equal brothers but as tools to exploit, and means to advance, their own stature within the community.

The message of Amos, therefore, fits well to the sad story of the parasha.

The jealous and hateful behavior of

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Ya'akov's sons toward Yosef reflected more than those emotions alone-it reflected the self-same lack of regard to their brother... and their father. Their desire to remove their "dreamer of dreams" spoke loudly of their desire to lord over, to control and to elevate themselves in the eyes of others – especially their father.

I would suggest, therefore, that Chazal's focus on Yehuda for his seemingly courageous act, was based upon their view that he was **THE leader** of the clan. His "compromise" to "merely" sell Yosef as a slave was not seen as a heroic act but as confirmation of the brothers' arrogant attitude to exploit Yosef for their own needs: the removal of Ya'akov's "favorite son" would improve their position vis a vis their father and their inheritance. Perhaps Chazal targeted Yehudah due to the rebuke of Amos who focused upon the leadership, the high officers and the influencers who shaped and impacted the very culture of the generation.

That is how they regarded Yehuda.

When Yehuda departed from his family, our Rabbis spoke for the brothers by quoting them as saying: "You told us to sell him! Had you told us to return him back home-we would have listened!!" A strange excuse for those who - themselves - were going to kill Yosef. But our ancient scholars might have well seen in the words of our haftarah the very message Hashem had was conveying to all future generations:

To see all of Israel as brethren, to empathize with the unfortunate....and to ensure that their leaders inspire the same. ■

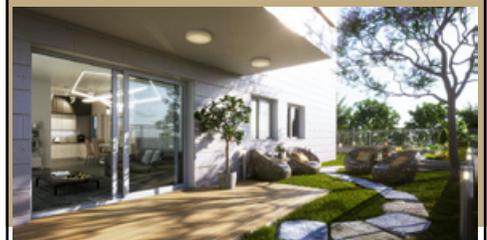
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