

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Moshe *ben* Ya'akov *a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

In Defense of Reality

PARSHAS VAYISHLACH 5777

At one point in this week's *parshah*, one of the great figures of Yisrael is portrayed in what appears to be an unflattering light. This is the incident involving Reuvein, son of Ya'akov, who is associated with an act of impropriety by the *passuk*: וַיֵּלֶךְ רְאוּבֵן וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֶת־בִּלְהָהּ פִּילגֶשֶׁת׃ וַיִּשְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּשְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל – “And Reuvein went and lived with Bilhah, his father's concubine; and Yisrael heard” (*Bereishis 35:2*).

Clearing a Name

It is obviously difficult to comprehend how such behavior could be attributed to one of the august tribal heads of Yisrael. Especially because it never happened – at least not in the way a superficial reading of the text might suggest. Consider the following wondrous account related by the venerated Chida:

A certain great Ashkenazic *rav* expounded this *passuk* in a public forum. What really occurred, he explained, was that Reuvein sought to guard the prestige of his own mother, Leah. This incident occurred shortly after the passing of Rachel, Ya'akov's most favored wife. He hoped that his father would now gravitate more toward Leah – but he seemed to detect that a preference was being fostered for Bilhah, instead. And so he “went” and positioned himself in front of Bilhah's quarters. Ya'akov “heard” – that is, he noticed Reuvein's presence there and thus neglected to enter within. In this way, Reuvein prevented seclusion. This was the extent of Reuvein's deed. This explanation the *rav* delivered in the name of the Rema, author of the classic glosses on the Shulchan Aruch.

Following this dissertation, Reuvein himself appeared to this *rav* in a dream. He placed a kiss on the *rav*'s forehead, thanking him for the public exoneration.

In this explanation, the Rema seems to have taken his cue from Chazal's comments on this subject. The Gemara (*Shabbos 55b*) issues an equivocal statement: כָּל הַאוֹמֵר רְאוּבֵן חָטָא אֵינוֹ אֶלָּא טוֹעֵה – “Whosoever declares that Reuvein committed a sin is simply corrupt.” What, then, of the Torah's account? What really happened, the Gemara explains, is that Reuvein “rearranged his father's sleeping quarters.” As this itself, for someone of Reuvein's elevated stature, may not have been entirely fitting, the Torah attributed it to him as if he had actually perpetrated a deed of impropriety. But for us to state that Reuvein actually committed that deed, the Gemara asserts, is patently false.

This whole notion manifests itself in an interesting way in another teaching of Chazal. Although no longer practiced today, the procedure for public Torah-reading used to involve not only a *ba'al korei*, a reader from the Torah scroll, but a “*metargeim*” (translator) as well. That is, in addition to the actual *parshah*, the translation of the verses from Targum Onkelos was also delivered. But there were some exceptions – one of them being this very incident. As recorded in the Mishnah (*Megillah 3:10*):

מעשה ראובן נקרא ולא מתרגם, מעשה תמר נקרא ומתרגם.

“The incident with Reuvein is read (in public), while the Targum is not offered; but the incident of Tamar is both read and its Targum is offered.”

Why, indeed, is the Targum omitted? After all, there are other incidents of related content – such as the episode of Yehudah and Tamar – for which the Mishnah sanctions both its reading, as well as the accompanying Targum!

The Maharal Diskin explains that this is one of the relatively rare instances of a Tannaitic dispute between the Mishnah and the Targum Onkelos. After all, the Targum translates the verse involving Reuvein in a straightforward fashion, thereby attributing the actual deed to Reuvein. By the Mishnah advocating in this instance to omit the Targum, it indicates its stance regarding the event – that is, in accordance with the above, the Mishnah is adamant that Reuvein committed no sin.

Stick to the Truth

To get a sense of the gravity Chazal confer upon this position, it is worthwhile to recount here an incident regarding a related issue.

The Chazon Ish was once present at a bar-mitzvah celebration. One of the guests, a distinguished *rav*, rose to speak. For one reason or another, he chose to cast aspersions on another noted figure from Tanach – King Shaul. The Chazon Ish was most uncomfortable with these assertions; after all, Chazal highlight the pristine nature of Shaul, even stating that “*lo ta’am ta’am chet* – he did not taste the taste of sin” (*Yoma 22b*). And so, in response to the speaker’s remarks, the Chazon Ish himself rose and declared: “*Nisht emes, nisht emes*” (It is not true; not true).”

The speaker (unwisely) persisted in his stance. He even tried to bring a Scriptural proof to his claim that whereas David had not sinned, Shaul had. To which the Chazon Ish emphatically replied: “*A ligger! A ligger!* (It is a lie! A lie!)”

(*The above is based in large part on selections from the sefer Talelei Oros, vol. II, pp. 106-108.*)

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