

TORAT HAR SHMUEL

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OF FRIENDS AND MUD

One of the most intriguing chapters in the entire Torah are the events that occur after Yehuda leaves his brothers following the sale of Yosef. One chapter is dedicated to a very difficult time in Yehuda's life, one that serves as the foundation for Levirate marriage and the planting of Messianic seeds. The chapter (Bereshis 38) is remarkably difficult to understand and I caution against reading into the text based on today's moral values. Within this chapter, there is a second theme that is worthy of our attention.

Yehuda develops a very close and warm relationship with an Adullamite man by the name of Chira. It's interesting to note the evolution of their relationship. The first time the Torah mentions his name (verse 1), he is referred to as, "an Adullamite man and his name is Chira". The second time, (verse 12), he is referred to as, "Chira, his friend, the Adullamite", while the

third time (verse 20) he is referred to as, "his friend, the Adullamite". When introduced, all we know about Chira is his name and nationality. The second time, Chira's status as Yehuda's friend is more significant than his nationality, and therefore precedes it. The third time, the Torah considers Chira's relationship with Yehuda to be so significant that his status as Yehuda's friend actually replaces his name. One would think that in this case, the more appropriate word for friend should be "chaver" from the word chibur which means tied together. Nonetheless, the only word used is raya, the same root as the word used in the verse Rabbi Akiva considers to be the main foundation of the Torah: "V'ohavto l'rayacha k'mocha, love your friend as yourself". (Vayikra 19:18)

A dear friend of mine, Dr. Howard Estrin pointed out that the root of "raya", friend, is "ra", which means bad. How are we to understand the relationship between these two intertwined words? Tamar had been waiting for many years for Yehuda to deliver his youngest son Shayla to her so the "yibbum" levirate marriage requirement could be consummated. It never happened. Tamar was told that Yehuda was on his

way to Timna to shear the sheep. Courageously and with great spiritual insight, she took matters into her own hands and portrayed herself as a “Kedaysha” at the crossroads leading to Timna. Yehuda could not resist and arrives at a price of a young goat to be delivered at a later time. Tamar demands a guarantee that her fee will be forthcoming, so Yehuda leaves her with his cloak, staff and signet, after which they enjoy each other’s company. (Giving his signet is today’s equivalent of sharing your social security number with a stranger.)

Now comes the difficult part: How to deliver the payment? He engages his friend Chira to deliver the promised sheep to this mysterious woman. Picture this. Chira is walking around a strange neighborhood, asking the locals if they have seen a very suspect woman conducting “business”. He’s lucky that the only response he received is that they knew nothing about her or her whereabouts. No one appreciates their neighborhood being identified as one that supports this type of activity. No one would be surprised if Chira’s questions were met with strong protest and a physical reminder not to return again. Please note that it is here (verse 20) that Chira is identified as Yehuda’s dear friend, his “ray’ah”.

The mussar haskil here is very clear. Sometimes one has to be willing to soil their hands in the process of helping their friend resolve a difficult situation. That’s exactly what Chira did here. The Torah expresses no protest on Chira’s part. His friend Yehuda is in a bind and has to have this payment made so he can retrieve his personal property. Yehuda, for whatever

reason, cannot deal with the situation himself so Chira unconditionally steps forward to help. Most people would view involving themselves in this type of scenario as bad, “ra”, and rightfully so. Chira could have said, “You got yourself into this mess. Get yourself out of it.” He could have offered to go with Yehuda rather than going to a strange neighborhood by himself. Chira did not. He asked no questions – he stood firm as a friend and did what was asked of him, even if it meant sullyng himself and possibly his reputation.

There is a well-founded Halachic reality that validates this philosophy. The greatest “chok” (a law whose meaning is beyond human comprehension), found in the Torah is that a Kohen who purifies someone, transforms them from a state of Tumah, (ritual impurity), to a state of Tahara, (ritual purity). In the process, the Kohen goes from being Tahor to tamei. There is no way that I can claim that what is stated here is the reason behind this Halacha. Please accept this as a character insight into this process. Maybe one of the lessons learned from the purification process is firmly rooted in the Kavono needed by the Kohain. He has to be willing to render himself impure for a short period of time in order to purify another. In other words, he has to be willing to get his hands dirty in the process of cleaning someone else’s. Even before the physical purification process begins, his “client” needs to be aware of the fact that this Kohain is his/her “ray’ah” – friend. The Kohen has to be aware of how stringent the person’s tumah was. Did a loved one die during his or her watch? Did they develop Tzora’as

due to a serious slip of the tongue?? Did they have a character flaw that motivated them to become a Nazir?? Are they bringing a Chatas and if so, for which sin? How embarrassed are they over the circumstances that rendered them tamei?? Can they talk about it, and if so, do they want to discuss the circumstances? A Kohain who simply goes through the motions of purification is missing an important point in this ritual interaction. Indeed, he lacks the character of his Grandfather, Aharon, the consummate lover and pursuer of peace. The Kohain is called upon to be a “ray’ah” to everyone who comes to him for purification during his watch.

HaRav Yosef Soloveichik in his famous work, “On Repentance” devotes one of the first chapters to a critical difference between the two goals one can achieve in the process discussed above. Bringing the required sacrifices to reestablish one’s ritual purity achieves “Kapporah”, atonement. The same status is achieved by paying a fine for a traffic ticket. A person is pulled over for driving while intoxicated. He goes through the motions of the court hearing, pays his fine, and serves time in prison if required. Once the court imposed requirements are completed, he’s achieved atonement for the infraction. The reality is that if he doesn’t come to grips with the crime he committed, a crime that could have very well killed an innocent person, then indeed there’s a good chance he may drive drunk again. Atoning for a sin does not prevent one from committing the same sin again.

If Kapporah atonement is not enough, what else can be done? That’s where the Kohen has the poten-

tial to be of tremendous assistance. The Kohen’s interaction with his ‘client’ can begin the process of achieving “Tahara” – spiritual purity that ultimately reestablishes “dveykus”, divine bonding between the owner of the sacrifice and our Heavenly Father. Compared to going through the motions of Kapporah atonement, the greater part of the Teshuva repentance goal is achieved in the Tahara purity process. An empathetic Kohen can cause one to take a good look inside their Neshama, recognize the spiritual blemish that remains after Kapporah is achieved, and deal with said stain until it is cleansed.

In the times of the Bais HaMikdash, there were twenty four rotations of different priestly families that served in the Temple for a two week period. If they took their responsibility seriously, engaging those whose sacrifices they offered, I would imagine that they were exhausted when they departed after their two week service. The sensitivity to say the right thing, precipitate a proper feeling of Teshuva, to make sure they departed in better spiritual condition than they were in when they entered must have been overwhelming for those who approached their task properly. I’m not even touching on the issues of confidentiality, which must have been challenging in a place as busy as the Bais HaMikdash.

This Halacha carries over to today. Before a Kohain “duchans”, blesses the Congregation, he makes the blessing acknowledging the commandment to bless Israel “b’ahava”, with love. Many are not aware of the fact that the Halocho is very clear. If a Kohen

seriously dislikes someone in the Kehilla, he cannot participate in blessing the congregation. His blessing will be in vein and his service, a sham. It's no wonder that many Rabbonim do not review the laws of "duchening" with the Kohanim in their Shul. If they did so properly, they may fear having none left to perform accordingly.

Chira exemplified the concept of "reyus" friendship, probably to the extent envisioned by Rebbi Akiva when he commented on the pasuk, "V'ohavta l'reyacha k'mocha" – "Love your friend as yourself". He was non-judgmental and able to keep a confidence. When Yehuda engaged Tamar, we can assume he did so discretely. In fact, the only person who may have known about this was Chira, since when he returned to retrieve Yehuda's belongings, the townsfolk (kindly) responded in the past tense: "There *was* no Kedaysha here", inferring they never saw her at all. Can we presume that Yehuda, in fact, confided in Chira? The first pasuk in this chapter clearly states that Yehuda must have met Chira upon his arrival, so he would know until where it was permissible to physically settle himself. As a result, Chira was probably aware of Yehuda's marriage to Shua, the birth of his three sons, the loss of two of them, sending Tamar back to her father's home, and the loss of his wife some time later. Life was anything but easy for Yehuda and the growth in their friendship lends credence to the reality that it may have very well been the shoulder of Chira that Yehuda cried and leaned upon. Who else was there? What we don't know is if Chira knew of Yehuda's lineage and everything that occurred with Yosef which

precipitated his move to the region. Nonetheless, what we can conclude is that Chira had to be a man of strong moral fiber and character to go to such great lengths of friendship for Yehuda.

Pirke Avos (5:16) speaks of two types of loving relationships, which can apply to the concept of friendship. The most valuable friendship is the one that thrives on the concept of "lishma", for its own sake. Two people (or more) recognizing the inherent value in each other coupled with the desire of sharing your life growing processes with them. Where life's journey takes any of us is a mystery. Nonetheless, walking that path with a true friend will make all the challenges encountered on the way easier to reconcile, all the pleasures we are blessed with more joyous and the all the accomplishments we share more meaningful. Leave the conditions aside for they only cripple and limit the potential of every relationship. Accept each other for who and what you are, flaws and all. Love and like with all your heart, so Hashem finds it pleasurable and desires to join your *chevra*.