



## מלכות יהודה

# The Kingdom of Yehuda

### ■ Scepter and Legislator

Yehuda's willingness to serve as a slave in Egypt in place of his little brother Binyamin became a historic icon of self-sacrifice. It was this that led Yosef to reveal his true identity to his brothers, thus bringing an end to the tribulations suffered by their father Yaakov ever since his beloved son Yosef disappeared.

The brothers' sale of Yosef into slavery was the most painful and difficult episode among the many difficulties Yaakov suffered throughout these years. It also represented the absolute low point in the brothers' hostility towards Yosef. Yet it was precisely from out of these depths of jealousy, anger, brotherly abuse and insensitivity to their father, that the process of healing begins to take shape – including repentance, regret, refinement of character, and recognition of the failure that led to the sins.

It was Yehuda who took the central role in the painful sale of Yosef to the Ishmaelites (even though he saved him from death in the pit). On the other hand, it was also he who later paved the way for *teshuvah* and confession, displaying inner strengths of extraordinary proportions. Let us follow his long journey: from sin, to rectification, and all the way up to the point where he is granted the Nation of Israel's crown of royalty.

Yaakov Avinu clearly designated the Kingship of Israel to his son Yehuda, as we read in his final death-bed blessings to Yehuda:

לא יסור שבט מיהודה ומחַקֵּק מִבֵּין רַגְלָיו...

*The scepter will not depart from Yehuda,  
nor the legislative pen from his lap...* (B'reshit 49,10)

The two tools promised to Yehuda in this verse are those of royalty: The king extends his scepter to grant permission, and his legislation determines

what his subjects may and may not do. The Ramban, in his commentary to this verse, states that it was this prophecy of royalty to Yehuda that ultimately undermined the kingdom of the priestly Hashmonaim – for they were descended from Levi, and not from Yehuda as Yaakov had designated.

By what merit did Yehuda deserve royal status? It would seem that it was his strong, proud stand against the Egyptian Deputy to the King, Yosef, as well as his resolute words in defense of his brothers in general, and his littlest brother Binyamin in particular.

### ■ **Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva**

The Tosefta - teachings of the Tannaim that were not included in the Mishna - tells us of a rare disagreement between Rabbi Akiva and four top rabbis of the time, students of Rabbi Tarfon. The argument revolved around this question: “In what great merit did Yehuda deserve to have the Kings of Israel evolve from his tribe?” Let us read (Tosefta B'rachot 4,18):

**It happened that Rabbi Tarfon was sitting outside on Shabbat afternoon. He said to his students: “How did Yehuda merit royalty? It was because he admitted to having been with Tamar, and said, *She is more justified than I am* (B'reshit 38,26).”**

**Four sages were [later] sitting in the gateway of Rabbi Yehoshua's home: Elazar ben Matya, Chanina ben Chachinai, Shimon ben Azzai, and Shimon HaTimni. They were discussing what Rabbi Tarfon had told them.**

**Rabbi Akiva [arrived and] asked them the same question: “How did Yehuda merit royalty?” They answered him, “Because he admitted to what had happened with Tamar.” Rabbi Akiva responded, “Does he deserve a reward for a transgression?”**

**They gave another answer: “Because he saved his brother Yosef from death in the pit and suggested that his brothers sell him instead.” Rabbi Akiva retorted: “It is enough that the rescue atoned for the sale [i.e., he does not need to also be rewarded with the Kingdom]!”**

**Another answer was proposed: “It was because of Yehuda's humility in offering to take the place of his brother Binyamin when Yosef, ruler of Egypt, threatened to detain him there.” Once again, Rabbi Akiva retorted: “Yehuda was the guarantor, and therefore had no choice in the matter!”**

**The students then said: “Teach us the answer, our rabbi.”**

Rabbi Akiva said: “Yehuda’s merit is that he sanctified the Name of G-d. When all of Israel stood on the Red Sea with the Egyptians chasing them, and they all said, ‘I will not go in’ - the tribesmen of Yehuda were first to jump into the water, thus paving the way for the miracle of the Splitting of the Sea. As is written, ... בצאת ישראל ממצרים, היתה יהודה לקדשו, *When Israel left Egypt... Yehuda was the sanctifier of G-d’s Name* - and therefore: *Israel became his dominion* (Psalms 114, 1-2).”

### ■ Analyzing the Four Answers

The story of Yehuda and Tamar, recounted in the Torah portion of Vayeshev, begins with a series of calamities that befall Yehuda’s family: His two sons and his wife die, one after the other (B’reshit 38,7-12). We read of this immediately after the story of the brothers’ sale of Yosef, clearly alluding to the concept of sin and punishment. It also means that well before the famine and the troubles in Egypt, Yehuda was already undergoing a difficult period. Yehuda’s anguish is not described in the Torah; only the words “*and Yehuda was comforted*” (verse 12) give us a hint as to the deep heartache from which he needed to be consoled.

Our Sages’ query – “What did Yehuda do to deserve royalty?” – should not be understood merely as seeking technical information regarding Yehuda’s merits. It rather teaches us how one picks himself up from the lowly depths of sin and sorrow to the lofty heights of *teshuvah*. The Sages wish to instruct us how, by working very hard on oneself, one can correct corrupt traits that bring on spiritual deterioration, and turn them into sterling qualities that can lead to the very Kingdom of Israel.

Rabbi Tarfon, the first to ask about Yehuda’s merits, singled out his confession regarding Tamar as having brought him royalty. However, Rabbi Tarfon did not explain the precise connection between the two – until Rabbi Akiva appeared on the scene with his series of questions, leading Rabbi Tarfon’s students to a deeper understanding of their teacher’s words.

Rabbi Akiva begins with this strong objection: “Yes, Yehuda admitted his sin, but should he be rewarded for sinning and then confessing?” In other words: “True, Yehuda saved Tamar’s life by acknowledging his actions (because she would otherwise have been burned to death). And yes, the Sages teach that ‘whoever saves one Jew, is as if he has saved an entire world.’ But he brought about the entire situation in the first place!”

Thereupon, Rabbi Tarfon's students tried another approach: Perhaps it was Yehuda's act of saving his brother from death that was so meritorious? Rabbi Akiva justifiably negated this idea as well: Yehuda's idea of kidnapping Yosef and then selling him, instead of throwing him into a pit, is a capital crime, tantamount to murder! The Torah states clearly:

כִּי יִמָּצָא אִישׁ גֹּנֵב נֶפֶשׁ מֵאֶחָיו מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהִתְעַמֵּר בּוֹ וּמָכְרוֹ,  
וּמֵת הַגֹּנֵב הֵהוּא...  
...וּמֵת הַגֹּנֵב הֵהוּא...

*If a man is found stealing a fellow Jew, having abused him and sold him, that thief shall be put to death...* (D'varim 24,7)

At best, Rabbi Akiva says, his deeds canceled each other out; what was Yehuda's great merit? "It is enough that his rescue of Yosef atoned for the sale."

The students had another suggestion: Perhaps it was Yehuda's great humility in offering to save Binyamin that was his great merit? After all, humility is vital for the preparation and training of a King of Israel. The Torah stipulates that *"the king's heart [should] not be lifted up above his brethren"* (D'varim 17,20). It therefore seems logical that Yehuda's humility in offering to take his little brother's place in prison strongly indicates his suitability to be king.

Yet Rabbi Akiva objects once again: This act does not prove that Yehuda was humble, for he actually had no choice! He was simply fulfilling his contractual responsibility – the promise he gave his father Yaakov to personally guarantee Binyamin's safe return home. Does fulfilling one's promise qualify one for royalty?

Finally, Rabbi Akiva himself provided the ultimate answer: "The great merit that led to royalty is the sanctification of G-d's Name shown by the Tribe of Yehuda." When Yehuda's descendants jumped into the Red Sea before all the other tribes, they thus displayed their faith in G-d and their willingness to sacrifice for Him – and paved the way for the others to do so as well. This is the task of a King of Israel: to lead the nation with faith and trust in G-d, walking before the camp of Israel in times of war.

Let us look closely at the Tosefta above, and find that Rabbi Akiva did not disagree with Rabbi Tarfon or his students, but simply wanted to carefully analyze their words and supplement them. As we will see below, this will help us understand in depth the progression of Yehuda's repentance.

## ■ Taking Responsibility

Rabbi Akiva wishes to emphasize that Yehuda's idea to sell Yosef was nothing to be proud of. On the contrary: It was a crime bordering on wanton abandonment and irresponsibility, close to murder, and the lowest rung of the ethical deterioration to which Yehuda had plunged. The brothers abandoned young Yosef to the unknown while shaking off all responsibility towards their father and leaving him to his sorrow and mourning. The brothers showed no interest in the consequences of their actions.

Yehuda's punishment was very severe: he lost his wife, Bat Shua, and his two sons, Er and Onan. In fact, it is reminiscent of the calamity suffered generations later by Naomi in Megillat Ruth; she lost her husband Elimelech and her two sons, husbands of Ruth and Orpah. Elimelech had also shown no responsibility, departing the Land of Israel during a famine and leaving his poorer neighbors behind to starve. Let us not forget, too, that Elimelech was a leader in his generation, as well as a descendant of the Tribe of Yehuda.

Yehuda learns from his punishment, and begins the long and torturous process of rectifying his wrongs and taking responsibility. The answers given by Rabbi Tarfon's students represent stages in this process.

The first stage is not to shake off responsibility for one's actions. When Yehuda admitted that Tamar was correct and that he was wrong, he was assuming responsibility for what he did. As the Torah tells us:

וַיָּבֵר יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר צְדָקָה מִמֶּנִּי כִּי עַל כֵּן לֹא נִתְּתִיהָ לְשֵׁלָה בְנִי ...  
*Yehuda recognized [his possessions] and said,*  
*"She is more justified than I am, for I did not give her*  
*to my son Shelah."* (B'reshit 38,26)

But this was not the end of the process. The next stage took him a level higher, when he took responsibility not only for himself, but for someone else: his brother Binyamin. The very fact that he promised his father Binyamin's safe return from Egypt, taking up an obligation at great risk to himself, showed that he was on his way up the ladder of improving his character, morals and values.

Next came the third stage, the highest one of all: Yehuda's assumption of responsibility for all of Israel. When his descendant Nachshon jumped into the waters of the Red Sea, this represented a willingness to carry the load for the entire nation.

Climbing these three stages is what raised the Tribe of Yehuda to such a high level – that of royalty.

When Yehoshua bin Nun died, after leading Israel to military victories in conquering the Land of Israel, it was not clear who would replace him. *“After Yehoshua’s death, the Children of Israel asked G-d: ‘Who will lead us in the fight against the Canaanites?’”* Nothing is more appropriate than the answer that Hashem gave: *יְהוּדָה יַעֲלֶה*, *“Yehuda will go up.”* (Shoftim 1,1-2)

### ■ Sanctification of G-d’s Name

King David, son of Yishai of the Tribe of Yehuda, sanctified G-d’s Name when he fought with a mere rock and slingshot against the chief Philistine warrior, Goliath, armed from head to toe.

Before he went out to fight Goliath, David, the youngest of his family, was met with great disdain by his older brothers. Here is what his brother Eliav said when he heard his little brother asking about the promised reward for smiting Goliath:

לָמָּה זֶה יֵרֵדְתָּ וְעַל מִי נִטְשֶׁתָּ מֵעַט הַצֹּאן הַהֵנָּה בַּמִּדְבָּר.

אֲנִי יֹדְעִתִי אֵת זְדוּנָה וְאֵת רַע לְבָבָהּ כִּי לִמְעַן רְאוֹת הַמִּלְחָמָה יֵרֵדְתָּ.

*Why did you come down here, and with whom did you leave the few sheep in the wilderness? I know your insolence and your evil-heartedness, for you have come down [just] to see the battle.* (Shmuel I 17,28)

Eliav seems to be making a good point, noting the irresponsibility and carelessness David has shown in leaving his sheep without a shepherd. Someone who could do such a thing should seemingly not be trusted to endanger himself or his nation by embarking on a hopeless scheme against the giant Philistine.

In principle, Eliav is right. An irresponsible person is liable to endanger himself and others for what he thinks is *Kiddush HaShem*, the Sanctification of G-d’s Name. The Sages similarly teach that “not everyone who wants to take [i.e., act in] G-d’s Name may do so.” Not everyone is permitted to portray himself as a righteous, G-d-fearing person, for it could lead to arrogance. But in our case, the fear is that one who acts with immaturity and takes unrealistic chances is liable to bring about untold harm to the public.

However, Eliav was wrong – for he did not check his facts. David did not *“come down to see the battle,”* but was rather sent there by his father. Yishai

had asked David to visit his brothers at the battlefield, see how they were faring, and bring them some food packages from home: “*and he went as Yishai had instructed...*” (verse 20)

And regarding David’s sense of responsibility, Eliav’s accusation that he abandoned his sheep was also untrue. David made sure to entrust the flock, and his clothing, in the hands of a guardian:

וַיִּשְׁכֶּם דָּוִד בְּבֹקֶר וַיִּטֵּשׁ אֶת הַצֹּאן עַל שֹׁמֵר...  
וַיִּטֵּשׁ דָּוִד אֶת הַכְּלִים מֵעָלָיו עַל יַד שׁוֹמֵר הַכְּלִים...

*David arose early in the morning, and left his sheep with a guardian... David removed his clothing and gave it to the guardian of the clothes...* (verses 20-22)

We also see David’s sense of supreme responsibility when he risked his life to save the sheep in his care from the lion and bear. David fought valiantly for every single sheep, as he later told King Saul:

רָעָה הָיָה עֹבֵדְךָ לְאָבִיו בַּצֹּאן, וּבֵא הָאֲרִי וְאֵת הַדּוֹב וְנָשָׂא שָׂה מִהֶעֱדָר,  
וַיֵּצֵאתִי אַחֲרָיו וְהִכֹּתִיו וְהִצַּלְתִּי מִפִּי וַיִּקָּם עָלַי... וְהִכֹּתִיו וְהִמִּיתִיו.

*Your servant was a shepherd for his father, and a lion and bear came and took a sheep from the flock. I went out after it, and I saved the sheep from its mouth; it arose against me... and I smote it.* (verses 34, 35)

We thus see that David truly has an absolute sense of responsibility, which he employed on behalf of the armies of Israel when he stood alone against the giant Goliath. David is definitely worthy of thus sanctifying the name of G-d, the Lord of the Battles of Israel – and consequently, will be worthy of ruling over Israel.

Let us now return to the story in the Tosefta. We explained that Rabbi Akiva was not disputing Rabbi Tarfon, but was rather relying on and expanding upon his teaching. Rabbi Tarfon had noted the responsibility shown by Yehuda both personally and in terms of his family – and Rabbi Akiva elaborated by noting the sanctification of G-d’s Name that resulted when a descendant of Yehuda was first to jump into the frothy Red Sea. Only once we see that Yehuda exhibits the first two aspects of responsibility, can we be confident that he will show responsibility and dedication on a national level.

## ■ Yaakov's Blessing to Yehuda

The name Yehuda has two meanings. One comes from the root meaning thanks and gratefulness. When Leah gave birth to Yehuda, she said:

הַפַּעַם אֹדָה אֶת ה', עַל כֵּן קָרָאָה שְׁמוֹ יְהוּדָה.  
*"This time I will thank G-d" - and she therefore  
 called his name Yehuda.* (B'reshit 29,35)

The second meaning of the root of this name is "to admit" or "to acknowledge the truth." The word *vidui*, confession, comes from the same root.

The double meaning of this word comes into wide use by King David, in Psalms. In Chapter 111, for instance, he writes אֹדָה ה' בְּכָל לֵבָב, *I will thank G-d with all my heart*, while in Chapter 32, we read אֹדָה עָלַי פְּשָׁעַי לַה', *I will acknowledge my sins to G-d*.

The two meanings are related, of course, for when one expresses gratefulness, he is recognizing the truth. If a person denies that an act of goodness has been done for him, how will he ever be able to express appreciation? We must therefore remember that the foundation of gratefulness is "speaking the truth," as Yehuda did when he said that Tamar was *"more justified than I am."* (B'reshit 38,26)

When Yaakov blessed his sons on his deathbed, he blessed Yehuda with the second meaning of his name, namely, that his brothers would recognize and acknowledge his superiority over them:

יְהוּדָה אַתָּה יוֹדוּךָ אַחֵיךָ ...  
*Yehuda, your brothers shall acknowledge you...* (49,8)

The link between telling the truth and showing gratefulness reaches a climax in the awesome personality of King David, the greatest representative of the Tribe of Yehuda. On the one hand, his entire Book of Psalms is one of song, praise and **thanks** to G-d – and on the other hand, King David is the first king to **admit and acknowledge** his sin immediately, with no hesitation:

וַיֹּאמֶר נָתָן אֶל דָּוִד, אַתָּה הָאִישׁ... וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל נָתָן חָטָאתִי לַה'...  
*Natan the Prophet said to David, "You are the man [who has done  
 this sin]" ... and David said, "I have sinned to G-d."* (Shmuel II 12,7-13)

King David continues the tradition that he inherited from Yehuda, that which demands accepting responsibility for one's actions, even when it involves shame and humiliation.



King Saul, on the other hand, denied that he was personally responsible for not having fulfilled G-d's command to vanquish Amalek. This denial cost him his kingdom, as Shmuel clearly told him. (Shmuel I 15,23)

Sanctification of G-d's name by taking personal and public responsibility - this is the correct recipe, in the eyes of G-d and man, by which to build the Kingdom of Israel.

