

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter L: Ki Tavo (Deut. 26:1–29:8)

Essay 5. Avoided sins

“And it came to pass, when Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine; and Israel heard of it. Now the sons of Jacob were twelve.”¹ As will be discussed in this essay, we do not believe that Reuben literally slept with Jacob’s concubine.

שַׁבָּת פָּרָק ה' תנ"א, ר' שמעון בן אלעזר אומר מוצל אותו צדיק מאותו עון, ולא בא מעשה זה לידו. אפשר עתיד ירעו לעמוד על הר עיבל ולומר "ארור שכב עם-אשת אביו" ויבא חטא זה לידו וכו'.

Tractate Shabbat, chapter 5:

It was taught [in a Baraita that] Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says: This righteous person, [Reuben], was saved from that sin [of adultery], and that action did not come to [be performed by] him. Would it be possible that his descendants are destined to stand on Mount Ebal and say: “Cursed be he that lies with his father’s wife” (Deut. 27:20), while this sin came to him?

- Shabbat 55b

מקשים למה אינו מוכיח דראובן לא חטא מדבר המוקדם כמו שאמרו בסוטה דבאותה שעה שרצה יוסף להודק באשת פוטיפרע באתה לו דיוקנו של אביו ואמר לו, יוסף עתידין אחיד שיכתבו על אבני אפוד רצונך שימחה שמך מביניהם. והכי נמי נימא הכי שאילו חטא ראובן היתה אבנו פה או היה נמחה שמו משם.

People ask why [Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar] does not prove that Reuben didn’t sin from the earlier fact, as they said in tractate Sotah, that at the same moment that Joseph wanted to have relations with Potiphar’s wife:

His father’s image came and said to him: Joseph, [the names of] your brothers are destined to be written on the stones of the ephod, and you [are to be included] among them. Do you desire your name to be erased from among them, and to be called an associate of promiscuous women?

- Sotah 36b

So, too, let us say thus, that if Reuben had sinned, his stone would have faded, or his name would have been erased from there.

* English translation: Copyright © 2023 by Charles S. Stein. Additional essays are at <https://www.zstorah.com>

¹ Gen. 35:22.

ולדין לא קשיא קלל, דאיכא למימר ולטעמיך אמאי אינו מוכיח מפסוק המוקדם לכל, שתכף אחר המעשה כתיב "ויהיו בני-יעקב שנים עשר" וכמו שהוכיח שם ר' שמואל בר נחמני, אלא ודאי צריך לומר דדילמא עבד תשובה וכדאמרין התם בפסוק וצוועת, הרפתת, פרתה חטא ממך.

For us, this is not difficult at all, that it could be said, “And according to your reasoning, why doesn’t he prove from the earliest verse, that immediately after the matter, viz, “that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine,” it is written, ‘Now there were 12 sons of Jacob.’² As Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani proved there:

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said that Rabbi Yonatan said: Anyone who says that Reuben sinned [with Bilhah] is nothing other than mistaken, as it is stated: “Now the sons of Jacob were twelve.” [The fact that the Torah stated the number of Jacob’s sons at that point in the narrative] teaches that, [even after the incident involving Bilhah], all [of the brothers] were equal [in righteousness]. [Apparently, Reuben did not commit such a grievous sin.] How then do I establish [the meaning of the verse]: “And he lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine”? This [verse] teaches that [Reuben] rearranged his father’s bed [in protest of Jacob’s placement of his bed in the tent of Bilhah and not in the tent of his mother Leah after the death of Rachel]. And the verse ascribes to him [liability for his action] as if he had [actually] lain with [Bilhah].

- Shabbat 55b

Rather it’s certainly necessary to say that perhaps he repented, and as it is said there, in the adjacent text of the Gemara, “you shook, you recoiled, and the sin flew from you.”³

הכי נמי יש לומר שאינו מביא ראיה מאבני אפוד משום דלאחר שחטא שמה עשה תשובה ונתקבלה תשובתו ומשום הכי לא נמחה שמו, אמנם מהר עיבל שפיר מיייתי ראיה, שאם האמת שחטא לא היה גוזר הקב"ה שיהיו בניו מן המקללים, כפרש רש"י שם, ואף על פי שעשה תשובה עם כל זה היה לו למזכרת עון מעשיו הראשונים.

Indeed, it can be said that he does not bring a proof from the stones of the ephod, because after he sinned, perhaps he repented, and his repentance was accepted, and because of this, his name was not erased. Indeed, bringing a proof from Mount Ebal is fine, for if the truth is that he had sinned, the Holy One, Blessed be He, would not have decreed that his sons would be among those cursing on Mount Ebal, as Rashi interprets there.⁴ Also, even though he repented, nevertheless he would have, as a reminder of his sin, his initial actions.

² Gen. 35:22.

³ Shabbat 55b.

⁴ For the reading from Shabbat 55b quoted above, “Would it be possible that his descendants are destined to stand on Mount Ebal and say: ‘Cursed be he that lies with his father’s wife’ (Deut. 27:20), while this sin came to him,” Rashi writes: “and the Holy One, Blessed be He, decreed they [i.e., the descendants] would be among those cursing.”

אלא דקשה מה שאמר אותו הדיוקן ליוסף עתידין אהיה שיכתבו וכו' רצונה שימחה שמה מביניהם וכו', דנה אינו מוכרח שימחה שמו, דשמה אחר כך יעשה תשובה ויתקבל אף הוא. ואם תאמר מפני החשש שלא יעשה תשובה או משום שלא יתנה נראה פאמר אטא ואשוב, אם פן קשה למה מן השמים חסו על יוסף שלא יחטא ושלחו אותו הדיוקן כדי לטורדו ולהפרישו מן החטא ולא כך עשו לראובן לטורדו שלא יחטא.

Rather, it is difficult what [his father's] likeness said to Joseph, “your brothers are destined to be written on the stones of the ephod, etc. Do you desire your name to be erased from among them, etc.” For this sin does not compel that his name be erased, for perhaps afterward he will repent and even he will be accepted.

If you will say that it was because of the fear that he won't repent, or because it shouldn't appear that he is saying, “I will sin and I will repent”—if so, it is difficult to understand why Heaven had mercy upon Joseph that he wouldn't sin. Why did Heaven send sent him [his father's] likeness in order to drive him away from the sin and to rebuke him, and such wasn't done for Reuben, to drive him away so that he wouldn't sin.

וגיש לומר דהחטא של יוסף היה חטא יותר גדול שאין לו תיקון כל כך מהר כדאמרנו בפירק קמא דעירובין שלכל הפושעים אתי אברהם ומקבל להו, לבר מישאל הבא על הנכרית דלא מבשקר ליה. ובעל פרחו צריך להיות גידון באש הגהינם כדפירש שם הרי"ף ותוספות ז"ל ועיין שם.

It can be said that the sin of Joseph that he was able to avoid was a greater sin, for there was no very quick correction. This is as it is said in the first chapter of tractate Eruvin, that for every sinner “liable at that time [for punishment] in Gehenna, Abraham comes and receives them, except for a Jew who had relations with a gentile woman, [in punishment for which] . . . [Abraham] does not recognize him [as one of his descendants].”⁵ He necessarily must be judged in the fire of Gehenna, as the Rif⁶ explained there, and the Tosafists of blessed memory,⁷ and see there.

* * *

⁵ Eruvin 19a.

⁶ This is not the earlier and more famous “Rif” [Rabbi Isaac Alfasi (1013-1103)], but rather Rabbi Josiah ben Joseph Pinto (c. 1565–c. 1648), Syrian rabbi and preacher, a disciple of Rabbi Chaim Vital. His sefer, *Me'or Enayim* (Part One: Venice 1643; Part Two: Mantua 1743) was a commentary on Rabbi Jacob ibn Habib's *Ein Yaakov*, a compilation of Aggadic material from the Talmud. Both parts of *Me'or Enayim* are now commonly printed together with the *Ein Yaakov*.

⁷ Tosafot on Bava Metzia 58b.