

Rav Kook Torah



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When Great Souls Err

Shortly before his death, Yaakov blessed his sons. Some of these blessings, however, were more like reprimands:

“Reuven, you are my firstborn... first in rank and first in power. [But since you were] unstable as water, you will no longer be first, for you moved your father’s beds” (B'reishit 49:3-4).

According to some opinions, Reuven did not actually interfere with his father’s sleeping arrangements.

After Rachel’s death, Yaakov moved his bed to the tent of Rachel’s handmaid, Bilha. Reuven, deeply disturbed by what he saw as an affront to his mother Leah’s honor, moved his father’s bed to Leah’s tent (Shabbat 55a).

He intended to do so, indignant at what he saw as a slight to his mother’s honor and her position in the household. But at the last minute, Reuven restrained himself.

How did Reuven succeed in overcoming his intense feelings of injustice and dishonor?

Reuven’s Fear of Punishment

One scholar inferred the method Reuven used to master his anger by reversing the letters of the word PACHAZ (“unstable”) to ZAYIN-CHET-PEI and reading it as an acronym:

ZACHARTA – You reminded yourself of the punishment for this act;

CHALITA – you made yourself ill over it; and

PEIRASHTA – you avoided sin (Shabbat 55b).

This explanation is surprising. Was Reuven motivated by the lowest form of YIRAT SHAMAYIM (awe of Heaven) – the fear of punishment? Was this the only way the tzadik could prevent himself from wrongdoing? Could such a great individual not take advantage of more lofty incentives, evoking his natural love and awe of God in order to avoid sin?

The Achilles’ Heel of Great Souls

Some people are blessed with such nobility of soul that their traits are naturally virtuous and good. Yet even these tzadikim need to recognize their limitations as fallible human beings. They too may be misguided. Precisely because they rely so heavily on their innate integrity, they may more easily fall into the trap of deluding themselves and making terrible mistakes, inflicting great

harm on themselves and those around them.

Truly great souls will avoid this mistake. They carefully examine the source of their moral outrage. Further examination may indeed reveal that their zealous response comes from a sense of true injustice. But if they have any doubts as to the source for their powerful emotions, they can adopt a different approach. Instead of examining the matter in terms of ideals and lofty visions of the future, they will take into account more commonplace moral considerations. Such unpretentious calculations are sometimes more effective than nobler considerations.

Reuven reminded himself that he would be held accountable for disrupting the delicate balance in the family and temporarily usurping his father's position. The simple reminder of the personal price to be paid helped Reuven clear his mind. He was then able to analyze more accurately his true motivations and arrive at the correct moral decision.

The resulting inner turmoil was tremendous. Reuven was accustomed to following the dictates of his innate integrity. The conflict between his sense of injustice and his awareness of the correct response was so great that he felt ill – emotionally, and even physically: “You made yourself ill over it.”

This too indicates greatness of soul: the ability to acquiesce to moral imperatives. Truly great individuals are able, like Reuven, to rein in all of the soul's powers when necessary. They recognize the absolute justice of the Eternal Judge, before Whom there are no excuses and no exceptions. They follow the dictum that even if the entire world – your entire inner world – tells you that you are righteous, still consider yourself fallible (see Nida 30b).

Much good can result from recalling the punishment for wrongdoing, even if this motivation may appear beneath one's spiritual stature. This simple reminder can overcome all the sophisticated calculations – calculations which may mislead even the noblest souls. In this fashion, Reuven succeeded in avoiding sin and retained his moral integrity.

*Sapphire from the Land of Israel.
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