

The Essence of Responsibility and the Nature of Leadership

Emmanuel Levinas, David Ben-Gurion, Friedrich Nietzsche, S. Yizhar, Jean-Paul Sartre, Viktor Frankl, and—of course—Joseph and Judah, seek to elucidate the question of responsibility.

By Dr. Roy Cohen

- A. In recent times, particularly following the horrific disaster of October 7th, many have been "taking responsibility." We are not referring to those heroic reservists who abandoned their daily routines to enlist and station themselves at the front, nor to the kind-hearted volunteers who give of themselves day and night, in spirit and substance, for the sake of others. All these are blessed and worthy of merit. Rather, there is a new fashion, almost a "TikTok challenge": men of power, politicians, and senior security officials declare every other morning that they "accept responsibility" for one event or another. But what is the meaning of this responsibility? How is it manifested? Does it bring any measure of solace to those harmed by the blindness, the helplessness, and the negligence that largely led to the disaster? Is there an accompanying sanction? And most importantly: does the mere declaration of taking responsibility constitute a *tikkun* (rectification)?
- B. To answer these questions, we must step back and ask: what is the source of responsibility? Responsibility may arise from holding a specific office or from the mere acceptance of authority. For example, a soldier, though serving under mandatory conscription, can be responsible for executing the mission assigned to him. Should he fail to fulfill it or prove negligent, he may bear the consequences. Yet, in a deeper sense, the concept of responsibility stems from an anti-deterministic worldview. The freedom granted to man to influence his life obligates him to be responsible for his destiny. **"Our responsibility is much greater than we might have supposed,"** argued the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, **"Man is responsible for what he is. He is responsible for all men."** Despite circumstances beyond one's control, man possesses the freedom of choice and the autonomy to decide how to act and how to navigate within reality. The capacity to choose gives birth to responsibility. As Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, defined it: **"Independence has a positive meaning, and that is the essence. The positive content of independence means responsibility—heavy and great responsibility."** But how do we measure and gauge that weight of responsibility? A hint: a statement at a press conference or a post on X (formerly Twitter) is not enough.

- C. In the Book of Genesis, we encounter numerous stories in which the question of responsibility arises. At the beginning of the book, immediately after the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, the most existential question is directed at the first man: **"Where art thou?"** (*Ayeka*). Instead of standing tall and saying **"Here I am"** (*Hineni*), he chooses to evade. Thus, when asked why he ate from the tree, he hastens to shift the responsibility to Eve. She, in turn, seeks to roll the responsibility onto the serpent. It is no wonder that when their son, Cain, is asked, **"Where is Abel thy brother?"**, he absolves himself of responsibility and answers with feigned innocence: **"Am I my brother's keeper?"** Against this painful narrative, it is worth examining another family story, no less complex: Joseph and his brothers.
- D. Joseph, the dreamer, is sent by his father's command to see to the welfare of his brothers. In a declaration that echoes with modern-day relevance, Joseph proclaims: **"I seek my brethren."** However, the brothers can no longer **"speak peaceably unto him."** They hated him after he brought an "evil report" of them to their father. They could not tolerate his dreams of royalty or the preferential treatment he received from their father; they envied him. Now, meeting in Dothan without their father nearby, they seek to kill him. Reuben and Judah, each in his own way, appear to pity their younger brother. Ostensibly, they seek to avoid bloodshed. Yet, it is possible they are preoccupied with creating an alibi that would remove responsibility from them, clear their consciences, and sever the causal link to Joseph's fate. Reuben, not wanting to be directly responsible for the murder, suggests throwing him into a pit. After Joseph is cast into the pit, Judah raises a possibility that further distances the guilt from the brothers — **"and let not our hand be upon him."** Thus, Joseph is sold to the Ishmaelites and eventually arrives in Egypt. Immediately following this harrowing episode, the story of Judah and Tamar stands—seemingly out of context. Only afterward does Joseph's phenomenal and miraculous story continue to unfold: first as a talented slave to Potiphar, then as an interpreter of dreams in prison, then as Pharaoh's interpreter, until his rise to greatness as a provider for his brothers and all of Egypt.
- E. **"I always try to extract meanings from theological language that are directed toward logic,"** wrote the Jewish-French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. **"When I find something in the sources that might appear as theosophy... I try to search for its meaning in human life and for human life."** In this spirit, let us attempt to discern the connection between the

miraculous story of Joseph and the realistic-human story of Judah and Tamar. Spoiler: this exposition provides a vital lesson on the meaning of responsibility, the importance of rectification, and man's ability to influence the world.

F. Beyond the spirit of hope one can adopt from Joseph regarding faith and the ambition to realize great dreams, the process he underwent—from being cast into the pit to being appointed viceroy of Egypt—was, as he defined it himself, supernatural: **"But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good."** On the other hand, the process Judah underwent—from the sale of Joseph to the moment he displayed extraordinary leadership (**"Then Judah came near unto him, and said: 'Oh my lord...'"**)—is a process of disillusionment and the acceptance of personal responsibility. What caused this transformation in Judah's approach? How did he turn from a man seeking to save his conscience into a man taking responsibility for the future of his family and nation? How, as Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks put it, did **"the apathetic become the empathetic"**?

G. **"And it came to pass at that time, that Judah went down from his brethren."** Immediately after the crime scene was blurred, Joseph's coat of many colors stained with blood, and Jacob's mourning for the loss of his son—after his sons forced him to **"know now"** that **"an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces"**—something in Judah's worldview cracked. He withdrew from his brothers in the initial recognition that something had gone wrong. In a tragic and analogous parallel to Joseph's abuse, Judah himself suffers the loss of his children, loses his signet and his cloak, and is finally pushed to recognize his sin and admit: **"She hath been more righteous than I"** (*Tzadka mimeni*). Judah learns the lesson firsthand. Slowly, he abandons the approach that allows fate to manage reality and begins to take responsibility for his actions. His existence, in the terminology of psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, becomes authentic: he is no longer **"pushed"** by fate, circumstances, or random impulses, but becomes responsible for his life. From being subject to an **"external push,"** in the words of Rabbi Kook, he adopts an **"internal push"**—he begins to actively write his powerful story.

H. **"Every human being knows quite well that he is in the world as a unique entity only once,"** wrote Friedrich Nietzsche. **"No one can build you the bridge on which you, and only you, must cross the river of life. There is**

one path in the world that none can walk but you." Judah internalized the responsibility resting on his shoulders. He changed. He adopted the norms of a leader—specifically, the willingness to bear the consequences. In doing so, he bypassed the natural candidate for leadership, Reuben the firstborn. When the brothers attempted to convince Jacob to allow them to take Benjamin to Egypt at the request of the governor Zaphnath-paaneah (who was Joseph), Reuben turned **"unto his father"** and offered: **"Slay my two sons, if I bring him not to thee."** Judah, however, turned **"unto Israel his father"** and promised: **"I will be surety for him; of my hand shalt thou require him."** The differences are profound: Reuben appeals to his father; Judah appeals to history—to *Israel*. Reuben offers his sons as collateral; Judah offers himself! The responsibility Judah assumes is more tangible, and it indeed convinces his father. In that same spirit of true responsibility, Judah knows that only he can step forward and approach the ruler, and he does so. **"Judah was ready to suffer everything willingly for the sake of saving his brother,"** wrote Flavius Josephus. He **"threw himself at Joseph's feet, and all his efforts were directed toward calming his anger and bringing him to reconciliation."**

- I. The responsibility Judah represents is not empty. it is not a mere statement, but is expressed in reality. Admittedly, at the start of the negotiation, he suggests to Joseph that responsibility should fall on all brothers collectively: **"Behold, we are my lord's servants."** But Joseph makes it clear that this is not the way. In a sense, Joseph—the younger brother—teaches his elder brother how leadership and responsibility must be constructed. Judah gets the hint: **"Then Judah came near (*Vayigash*) unto him."** Judah stands before his destiny. He takes all responsibility upon himself. At the decisive moment, he declares: **"For thy servant became surety for the lad unto my father, saying: If I bring him not unto thee, then I shall bear the blame to my father for ever. Now therefore, let thy servant, I pray thee, abide instead of the lad a bondman to my lord; and let the lad go up with his brethren. For how shall I go up to my father, and the lad be not with me?"** In these words, Judah demonstrates responsibility toward his father, thereby expressing remorse and repentance for his past actions—the sale of Joseph and the heartache caused to Jacob. Simultaneously, Judah assumes responsibility in the current situation—a responsibility that includes a real sanction if not performed correctly: **"Now therefore, let thy servant, I pray thee, abide instead of the lad."** Judah closes the circle; his responsibility is real. It can be measured in reality. This responsibility, as Emmanuel Levinas describes it, is **"a responsibility that no one can replace me in, and from which no one can exempt me. The**

impossibility of evading—that is the 'I'." Indeed, Judah undergoes a significant and concrete process—he becomes a leader in practice—becoming who he is.

- J. The result was not long in coming: **"Then Joseph could not refrain himself... and he wept aloud... and Joseph said unto his brethren: 'I am Joseph; doth my father yet live?'"** Joseph weeps. He did not weep when they threw him into the pit; he did not weep when he sat in prison. Now he weeps. He weeps because he sees the historical process Judah has undergone; he weeps because it is now clear to him how acts of human responsibility and courage can influence the supernatural process. "Now," he can say to his brothers and to himself with certainty: **"Be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life."**
- K. Years later, as Jacob lies dying, he blesses Judah: **"Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise... Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, thou art gone up."** Indeed, Judah was a partner in the trauma of **"Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces,"** but he changed for the better. It was Judah who knew how to say **"She hath been more righteous than I."** It was Judah who knew how to say **"Oh my lord,"** while placing himself at the front of the risks. **"One must accept responsibility, stand tall and accept responsibility,"** wrote Israel Prize laureate S. Yizhar (Yizhar Smilansky), **"with all the hardship and pain that comes with accepting responsibility. And that is all. Enough with melting hearts and being weak. One must simply take responsibility and do things."** Thus did Judah. The responsibility he took did not remain as words in a vacuum or a post on Facebook. His responsibility led to a *tikkun* in reality. He himself led the rectification. Therefore, as Israel his father blesses him: **"The sceptre shall not depart from Judah."**
- L. The distance between declaring the taking of responsibility and acting accordingly is vast. **"In every responsibility,"** as Yizhar wrote, **"there is pain... it is a verdict."** However, the sanctions and consequences that should accompany a declaration of responsibility do not stem from revenge alone or a search for blame. They are meant to reveal the recognition of the depth of the failure and to point the way toward rectifying the situation. **"The responsibility of deeds,"** in the words of Rabbi Kook, is dramatic, but it is not merely a burden and a heavy load. As we have seen, responsibility fundamentally arises from the idea of human freedom to act and improve reality. The historical role of Judah, like the role of each and every one of us, is

a leading and influential role—at all times and in all places. And in the stirring words of Rabbi Kook: **”Responsibility for all of existence, of all the worlds, which are in the hand of man to increase within them grace and light, life, joy, and honor, when he walks in a straight path, when he strengthens and girds himself with pure courage to conquer before him the paths of good and exalted life, and he goes and rises from strength to strength.”**

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