

Why Are We Called Jews?

Category: Bereishis, Mikeitz

Everyone knows the story of Solomon's Justice. Why is it read in this week's Haftorah, and how does it reflect on the condition of the Jewish people?

The Mares and the Foal

I recently read a story that occurred in the Holy Land about 100 years ago.

Two Arab businessmen shared a stable of horses. Each businessman owned one pregnant mare (mother horses, in plain English) that lodged in the stable.

One morning, they discovered that both mares had given birth the previous night. One birth was live and other was dead.

An argument immediately broke out—each businessman claimed the one live foal (that's "baby horse") was his. They could not determine which mare was the mother, as the foal would sometimes nurse from one and sometimes from the other. So the argument got more and more heated. The two Arabs finally decided to go try the case by a rich Jew named Nissim Bechor, who was famous for being an upright and wise man to whom everyone came to settle their disputes.

When he heard their story, Nissim Bechor advised them to bring the two mares and the foal to his own stable, and in one month, he would solve the problem.

For the entire month, all the towns and villages were buzzing about the story. Everyone wanted to know how the clever Jew would answer the question of which mare was the real mother.

After 30 days, the two disputants returned to Nissim Bechor, along with their clans and an army of rubberneckers.

Mr. Bechor brought out the two mares and the foal from his stable and led all three down to a lake. At the shore waited a large rowboat with six strong sailors inside, three on each side. Nissim left the two mares on dry land and led the foal onto the rowboat. Then he got on board and had the two businessmen get on board as well.

“Forward!” he ordered the sailors. As soon as the rowboat moved out onto the water, the mares ran wildly into the water after the boat. The businessmen started yelling, “Stop! Stop! We’ll lose our horses! We’ll work something out about the foal! Just stop this massacre!” But Nissim kept shouting at the sailors, “Forward! Faster! Faster!”

The horses were up to their ears in water, paddling furiously as they tried to swim after the boat. The rowboat kept going. The crowd of onlookers roared in commotion. In the middle of all the drama, one of the horses suddenly turned its neck and began swimming back in the direction of the shore.

As soon as that happened, Nissim Bechor stood up in the rowboat, pointed at the horse still swimming madly in pursuit, and cried out, “that one is the real mother!”

Solomon’s Justice - In Return

This story reminds us of the famous “Solomon’s Justice” case—the most famous ruling in all of Tanach. Of all the stories in the Tanach, this one became the one most universally known.

In most years, the Haftarah of this week’s Torah portion, Mikeitz, is the story of Solomon’s Justice.

Speaking of which, the story is told that in a little Jewish village in Europe, there were two families whose daughters came of marriageable age. The parents wrote to a matchmaker in the big city, asking for two fine Yeshivah students to be sent to their village to marry their daughters.

The matchmaker notified them in return that on such-and-such a day, the two selected young men would be arriving on the train from the big city.

The two mothers arrived at the train station at the appointed time and waited with sore eyes to meet their future sons-in-law. The train finally pulled up—and what a mess! Only one Yeshivah student got off the train, and each mother claimed that the young man was there for her daughter.

Nu? They argued and squabbled, and finally went to the village rabbi.

The rabbi listened to both mothers' arguments and said, "Let's do what King Solomon did: Let's slice the young man in two, and each one of you will take one piece!" One mother said, "No! Have pity on him! I'm prepared to compromise." The other one said, "Cut him up!" The rabbi pointed to the second mother and called out, "That's the real mother-in-law!"

Yosef's Test

But seriously, why indeed do we generally read the story of Solomon's Justice at Parshas Mikeitz? What's the connection?

In the story of Yosef meeting his brothers as the grand vizier of Egypt, he seems to be testing his brothers to see how much they cared for each other.

First, Yosef took Shimon away from the rest of the brothers—and they all went back to the Holy Land without Shimon. Then they came back to Egypt with Binyomin.

So Yosef tried again. He tested them to see who would be prepared to give up his own life for his brother—to see "who was the real mother." Ultimately, this turned out to be Yehudah, who was ready to go as far as sacrificing his own life. It was Yehudah who took responsibility for Binyomin—as he had told Yaakov: "I will guarantee him; from my hand, you may demand him."

The Continuation

But this taking of responsibility, this guarantee, was not just for that generation but rather, for all future generations.

Everyone knows the story of David and Goliath—little David going into battle against the giant Goliath. Now, who was the Jewish king whom David came to rescue from Goliath? Shaul.

Along comes the Midrash Tanchuma and says something amazing: "When did Yehudah repay his obligation? In the days of Goliath. Since the Jewish People were in trouble at that time, Yishai said to his son David, 'Here is the time to fulfill that obligation of your ancestor, who guaranteed Binyomin to his father.'"

Now, King Shaul was from the Tribe of Binyomin, while David was from the Tribe of Yehudah. So what Yishai was really saying to David was: “We took responsibility for the Tribe of Binyomin—that’s why we need to go rescue Shaul from the hands of the Philistines.”

And indeed, that’s what David did.

For Future Generations

The Midrash continues with an interesting twist:

“G-d said to David, ‘By your life, as surely as you gave your life for Shaul of the Tribe of Binyomin just like your ancestor Yehudah did for Binyomin... by your life, while all the Tribes shall ultimately be exiled, the Tribes of Yehudah and Binyomin will not be exiled with them.’ ”

Indeed, all ten other Tribes were exiled and lost, and we do not know today where they are. Only two Tribes kept the Jewish People alive to this day—over the last 2,500 years, the entire Jewish People has been composed of only two Tribes, Yehudah and Binyomin.

The responsibility that Yehudah took for Binyomin is what caused these two Tribes to be all that was left of the Jewish People throughout all the generations.

Why We Are Called Jews

This is why the classic interpreter Yonasan Ben-Uziel interprets the verse “Yehudah, your brothers will acknowledge you” as “They will be called ‘Yehudim’ after your name.”

Today, the Jewish Nation is not known as the Hebrews or the Israelites—we are called Yehudim, Hebrew for “Judah-ites.” (Which, by the way, is where the English word “Jews” comes from—from “Judah.”) We are called Yehudim because Yehudah symbolizes taking responsibility for a brother and being ready to give up one’s life for another Jew.

In other words, what does it mean to be a Jew? To be a Jew means to be one who cares.

Jews are always activists. They're always getting involved in something. You'll always find Jews fighting for the disadvantaged and the poor. Jews are always the first to get involved in any charitable cause, whether a hospital, helping the needy, orphanages, and the list goes on and on.

Why is this so? Because we are all Yehudahs—we are people who care. We are people who feel responsible for everyone. We care about everyone.

The Jewish People are like the mother who cares for the baby. And it was this sense of responsibility, this caring, that the Rebbe constantly tried to arouse in every Jew. The Rebbe wanted each of us not to be a Binyomin, not to be the one needing rescue but rather, to be a Yehudah—to be the one who shows leadership and responsibility.

This, my friends, is the secret of Jewish survival.