

Reuven went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine. (35:22)

Following the death of Rachel *Imeinu*, Yaakov *Avinu* established his primary residence in the tent of Bilhah, Rachel's maidservant. Reuven, who was Leah *Imeinu's* firstborn, considered this an affront to his mother. He said, "If my mother's sister, Rachel, was my mother's rival, does that mean that the handmaid of my mother's sister should be her rival?" He felt that Yaakov should have moved into Leah's tent – not Bilhah's. To defend his mother's honor, Reuven made the move into Leah's tent, taking Yaakov's bed and moving it into Leah's tent. While this is all that transpired, the Torah takes a stark view of Reuven's actions, considering it as if he had sinned egregiously. As a great person, his minor sin grew exponentially. Yaakov's intentions were noble. He had labored fourteen years to earn Rachel's hand in marriage. Despite not having as many children as her sister, Rachel still remained the *akeres ha'bayis*, mainstay of the household. In tribute to her memory, he assigned this honor to her maidservant. Furthermore, Bilhah was charged with raising the young Yosef and infant Benyamin, Rachel's two orphaned children.

Chazal examine Reuven's act of impetuosity and totally exonerate him. As far as they are concerned Reuven did not sin at all. The Torah's view is from the perspective of who the individual was. On Reuven's spiritual level, this is considered an immoral act. One does not tamper with another's right to conduct his marriage as he sees fit. Yaakov was the *gadol hador*, preeminent leader of that generation, the *b'chir ha'Avos*, chosen one of the Patriarchs. Reuven may have had strong feelings concerning his father's choice, but he should have kept them to himself. Just because we do not agree with a *gadol* does not sanction our taking the law into our own hands.

Yet, there will always be those zealots (or extremists) who decide on their own that Reuven acted inappropriately. They use the Torah's wording as support for their erroneous views and misplaced zealotry. Indeed, *Chazal* (*Shabbos 55b*) say: *Kol ha'omer Reuven chata eino ela toeh*; "Whomever claims that Reuven sinned is nothing more than mistaken." I was always bothered by this statement. Why would someone condemn Reuven when *Chazal* clearly exonerate him, stating unequivocally that Reuven was not a sinner? I figured that some people seek to stir up trouble. They must find demons beneath every situation. *Baruch Hashem*, I just came across an explanation from the *tzaddik*, **Horav Ezra Barzal, zl**. He questions *Chazal's* statement, *eino ela toeh*, "is nothing more than mistaken." Why do they not simply say: *Kol ha'omer Reuven chata – toeh*; "Whoever says that Reuven sinned is mistaken"? Why add, "he is nothing more than mistaken"? He explains that any person who suggests that Reuven might have sinned is not only mistaken concerning Reuven, but his entire life is one big mistake! He obviously is incapable of viewing the *Shevatim* and all of our great leaders in their proper perspective. One does not question Reuven's actions, because he does not understand who Reuven is!

Horav Reuven Karlinstein, Shlita, relates that one day (the then young) (*Horav*) *Yosef Dov (Berel) Soloveitchik, zl*, said over a *vort*, original Torah thought, to his father, the venerable **Brisker Rav**,

zl. He noted that, concerning Yitzchak *Avinu's* love for Eisav, the Torah writes, *Va'ye'ehav Yitzchak*, "and Yitzchak loved," in past tense; this is in contrast to its description of Rivkah *Imeinu's* love for Yaakov, *v'Rivkah oheves*, "And Rivkah loves," in the present tense. He explained this based upon the words of *Chazal (Pirkei Avos 5:16)*, "Every love that is dependent upon something- when that something becomes null and void – so does the love. On the other hand, a love that is not contingent upon a specific thing – it will last forever." Yitzchak loved Eisav because *tzayid b'fiv*, "game was in his mouth." Rivkah had no ulterior reasons for loving Yaakov, other than the fact that he was Yaakov. Yitzchak's love for Eisav ceased because it was love for a person due to a specific quality, which, once it became null, no longer engendered his father's love. His love for Yaakov, however, is eternal.

When the *Brisker Rav* heard the *dvar Torah* from his son, he became all shaken up and raised his voice, "Berel!" *Azoi rett men oif di Avos*; "Is this how we speak concerning the Patriarchs?" (Do we refer to their love as being the type of love that "regular" people have? Contingent love is a term that is applicable to such angels as the Patriarchs.)

In a lecture to *mechanchim*, Torah educators, *Horav Aharon Kotler, zl*, quoted *Chazal (Shabbos 112b)*, *Im reshonim bnei malachim, anu bnei anashim. V'im rishonim bnei anashim – anu ka'chamorim*; "If the previous Torah leaders are viewed by us as being on the same spiritual plane as Heavenly Angels, then we are like men. If, however, we view the earlier leaders as men, then we are not more than donkeys."

Rav Aharon quoted **Rav Akiva Eiger, zl**, who explained this pragmatically: How do we view the Torah leadership that has preceded us? If we view their qualities as being angel-like, we perceive them as being so much more elevated than we are. Then we are people. If, however, in our eyes, they are no different than we are -- they are human beings, great human beings, but human beings nonetheless-- then we are nothing more than donkeys. We must understand the concept of *yeridas ha'doros*, the decline of generations. As we view the *gedolim* of past generations, we indicate our own qualification to be included in the human race. If we do not perceive the difference of our generation, our *gedolim*, and the past generations – then there is something wrong with us. This is how we must approach the study of Torah, recognizing that the individuals about whom we are studying are in a league that is very distant from our own.