

VaYeshev - There Are No Minor Characters

Amy Harmon, a Pulitzer Prize-winning American journalist said this powerful statement:

Everybody is a main character to someone.

There are no minor characters.

Come with me as I introduce you to a character who is seemingly so minor that you may have missed him completely in the reading of today's Parshah - Parshat VaYeshev.

Our story opens in Chapter 38 after the brothers sold Joseph into slavery and told their father Jacob that he had been eaten by wild animals.

וַיְהִי בְּעֵת הַהוּא, וַיֵּרֶד יְהוּדָה מֵאֶת אָחָיו

*And it came to pass at that time, that Judah went **down** from his brothers.*

The word וירד - going down - is very telling. The midrash says that Yehudah was **sent** down and away by his brothers for advising them to sell Yosef. As we hear the story unfold, we may feel that it is even more; perhaps it is also a spiritual descent and an emotional descent.

Yehuda marries a Canaanite wife and together they have three sons.

Sadly, his two elder sons die as punishments from God and then his wife dies as well. Judah's daughter-in-law, Tamar, has been passed from his older son to his middle son according to the ancient law of *yibbum* – Levirate marriage – as they had no children together.

Yehuda is now fearful of giving Tamar to his youngest son *Sheilah* perhaps he would die as well! Instead, he leaves Tamar in limbo – sending her to her father's home where she is an *aguna* – a chained woman as she is not free to marry anyone else until she is either given to *Sheilah* in marriage or freed through the act of *chalitzah*.

Tamar retaliates and tricks Judah into sleeping with her by dressing as a harlot. When it becomes clear that Tamar is pregnant, she is accused of prostitution and about to be tried and burned by Judah himself!

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Tamar shows Yehuda the items that he had left with her in lieu of payment: his signet ring, his cloak and his staff. Tamar then leaves it up to him as to whether he will own up to his actions or not.

To Yehuda's credit - in spite of his intense shame - he publicly admits his part in the story and in doing so frees Tamar from her accusation and her status as a chained woman. He marries Tamar and together they have twin sons: one for each of her husbands. Yehuda returns to his brothers uplifted and ready to shoulder family responsibilities.

There are so many questions asked about this chapter:

- Why is this story placed here?
- Why does it interrupt the flow of the Joseph narrative?
- What lessons does it teach us?
- Can we teach it in our schools? It feels R-rated: death, punishment, sexuality, shame.

And all that is exactly what I DON'T want to talk about.

Rather - I'd like to show you a gem, a nugget enfolded within this story in the character of Chira the Adullamite.

I can hear you sayin: Chira Who? Adula - what?

I never heard of that guy!

Let me introduce you to him! Don't blink or you may miss him although he actually appears three times in our story.

At the beginning of our chapter when Yehuda goes "down" the verse says:

וַיֵּט עַד-אִישׁ עַדְלָמִי, וַיִּשְׁמוּ חִירָה

He [Judah] turned to an Adullamite man whose name was Chirah.

The next time we hear about *Chirah*, the Torah gives us a bit more information. Yehuda is going to check out his flocks.

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Listen closely:

וַיַּעַל עַל-גִּזְזֵי צֹאנוֹ הוּא וְחִירָה רֵעֵהוּ הָעֵדְלָמִי--תְּמַנְתָּהּ.

He [Judah] went up to oversee his sheep shearers - HE and his **friend** - Chira the Adullamite.

Yehuda is having a pretty tough time but he has made a friend; one who keeps him company and supports him as he travels about. The Torah does not waste words - the word **רעהו** - his friend - cannot be extraneous.

I imagine to myself what it was like for two friends to travel together in easy conversation and how consoling this might be to Yehuda after losing his two sons and his wife.

The third and last time we meet Chira is in the depths of Yehuda's shameful encounter with Tamar. He did not have payment for her and so he left a pledge – a collateral – in her hand. Yehuda comes back home and wants to settle his bill and collect his pledge. He sends out the payment – a kid-goat –

בְּיַד רֵעֵהוּ הָעֵדְלָמִי in the hand of his friend the Adullamite.

And I wonder - why was it so important for the Torah to mention again that this man was Judah's **friend**? In fact, this time, Chira's **name** is not mentioned but we know for sure who it is referring to because we were introduced to him before as the Adullamite who was Yehuda's friend.

I think that Yehuda really really needed a friend.

Not just any friend, but one who would stick by him, even in moments of shame, even at the lowest point of his life. A friend such as Chira is precious.

We know nothing about the conversations between Yehuda and Chira. They are not quoted in the Torah. This is as it should be – we are not privy to conversations between these two close friends. They are private and confidential. We can see them conversing but we may not eavesdrop.

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Perhaps Yehuda was able to share his burden of grief.

Perhaps he spoke with Chira about his indecision and his reluctance to have Tamar marry his youngest son. Perhaps he even spoke with him about the brothers' challenges with Yoseph and selling him into slavery!

We may never know exactly what they spoke about but we do know that Yehuda and the Torah valued this friendship.

Chira - a true and staunch friend - is not a minor character.

I believe that all of us have a role to play - no one is a minor character.

Each of us can touch someone. Sometimes we don't even know the impact of our actions and how much it matters. Teaching a class, reaching out a hand, offering a smile, saying a kind word.

Just this week I was having dinner with old friends.

We spoke about the Butterfly Effect - how a seemingly inconsequential action can have enormous impact.

My friend seemed shaken and he had tears in his eyes as he relayed this story. As a child he studied in a Conservative Hebrew school. There he had one teacher - a Chassid - who riveted the children with stories about the Ba'al Shem Tov and other great rabbis. One day he spoke about what it might mean to keep *mitzvot* and my friend found himself feeling ashamed that his family did not. After school, with averted eyes, he told the teacher that he wanted to keep some *mitzvot* but could not.

The teacher listened with great compassion and said to him: "You are a young boy, living in your parents' home and not everything is in your control. But when you leave and you go to college - you can make your own decisions."

In this simple way he removed my friend's guilt and planted a seed for the future. The seed sprouted and grew; in college he found himself searching and finding connection to Judaism and *mitzvot* and started keeping a kosher home.

This week starts the festival of Chanukah.

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We often highlight the major heroes of the story:

- In our prayers we remember the victory of the Jewish army in *Al HaNissim* and how the small band of Maccabees defeated the huge Syrian-Greek army
- We eat sufganiyot and latkes to remember the small vial of oil which miraculously burned for eight days and eight nights

But did you know that there is also a custom to eat dairy?

It's right there in the Shulchan Aruch – our Code of Jewish Law. And do you know why? Because there was a woman – a seemingly minor character whose name was Judith – Yehudit. She was a beacon of hope for the Jews and even helped turn the tide of the battle. **Here's her story:**

The Jews in a town leading up to Jerusalem were under siege. They were hungry, thirsty and bitter against God. They were ready to give up hope and surrender to the Greeks. But there was one woman – Judith – who stepped forward and said: NO. We cannot give up hope and faith in God. I have a plan.

With great charm and beauty, Judith courageously gained the trust of the Greek general and his army. Then – as soon as she saw her chance, Yehudit spent an evening in the general's tent, plying him with strong, salty **cheese** (that's where the dairy comes in). She then gave him strong wine to satiate his thirst and when he was drunk, passed out in his tent – she took his sword and beheaded him – completely demoralizing his army and leading the town to victory.

Yehudit may have had a small role in the war but she was no minor character. Judith was and still is today a model of what faith in God, courage and creativity can accomplish and she taught the Jews a valuable lesson in not giving up hope.

This Chanukah, let's do something a little different. As we focus on the main characters, let us also remember Judith – a beacon of hope. Let us remember Chira – a true and staunch friend.

Let us remember that in LIFE there are no minor characters.