



In Parashat Vayeshev, the Torah interrupts the narrative of the sale of Yosef into slavery to relate the incident of Yehuda and Tamar (chapter 38). Tamar was married to Yehuda's oldest son and then – after that son's death – to Yehuda's second son. After the untimely death of the second son, Yehuda refused to allow Tamar to marry his third son, and so she disguised as a prostitute along the road in order to have relations with Yehuda. This union resulted in the birth of twins, Peretz from Chetzron.

Maimonides, in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:49), addresses the various difficulties that arise from this narrative, and also notes the important lessons that could and must be extracted from this incident. One such lesson pertains to the importance of honest conduct, keeping true to one's word. When Yehuda hired Tamar's services, he promised to send her a young goat from his flock as payment. Indeed, upon his return home he sent a messenger to deliver the kid. The messenger returned to Yehuda to inform him that he could not find the prostitute, and Yehuda remarked, "Keep it... Look, I sent this kid, but you could not find her" (38:23). Yehuda affirmed having made every effort to fulfill his commitment and send the required payment to the woman. Maimonides notes that Yehuda's remark expresses the values of honesty and integrity that he had learned from his father.

In this context Maimonides notes that Yehuda not only kept his word by sending the young goat, but also made a point of sending a goat of the highest quality. Yehuda told his messenger, "Look, I sent *this kid* [*ha-gedi ha-zeh*]," which indicates that he selected a particularly choice animal from the herd for this purpose.

This comment of Maimonides brings to mind his more famous remarks in *Mishneh Torah* (Hilkhoh Issurei Mizbei'ach 7:11) regarding the importance of selecting only the highest-quality products in the performance of *mitzvot*:

For one who wishes to earn merit should subdue his evil inclination, give generously and bring his sacrifice from the nicest and choicest of that species from which he brings... This applies with regard to everything that is for the sake of the good God – it should be from the nicest and best. If one builds a house of prayer – it should be grander than his house of residence; if he feeds the hungry – he should feed from the best and sweetest [foods] on his table; if he clothes the naked – he should clothe from the nicest of his clothing; if he consecrates something, he should consecrate from the nicest of his possessions.

In the *Guide*, Maimonides extends this principle to even our most basic responsibilities, such as paying wages. Even when a person fulfills his most elementary obligations to his fellow, he should do so in the fullest manner possible, rather than in a begrudging, minimal fashion, just as Yehuda made a point of sending Tamar the highest-quality goat he could find.

All too often, we find people who pursue piety while neglecting propriety; who devote time and resources for worthy causes, but at the expense of their basic responsibilities. Maimonides extracts from the story of Yehuda the lesson that care and attention must be given to even the "little things," elementary responsibilities such as paying for services rendered. Kindness and generosity are manifest not only through involvement in charitable work, but also – and perhaps primarily – through the meticulous adherence to the basic principles of integrity and uprightness, in ensuring to conduct oneself with propriety in his everyday dealings with other people.