



Yehuda's Designation for Royalty By Rabbi David Silverberg

Parashat Vayechi is famous for Yaakov's final words to his sons before his death. In addressing his fourth son, Yehuda, Yaakov confers upon him the stature of royalty: "*Lo yasur sheivet mi-Yehuda*" – "The scepter shall not be removed from Yehuda" (49:10).

Maimonides, amidst his discussion of the laws of the Jewish king (Hilkhot Melakhim 4:9), presents a succinct description of the king's role in the nation:

In everything [the king does], his conduct must be for the sake of Heaven, and his goal and thought must be to uphold the true faith, to fill the world with justice, to break the arm of the wicked and to wage the battles of God. For a king is crowned in the first place only in order to do justice and wars.

According to Maimonides, the entire purpose of kingship can be narrowed down to two objectives: *mishpat* (justice), and *milchamot* (warfare).

In light of Maimonides' comments, we can perhaps identify the reason for Yaakov's designation of Yehuda as the father of the royal tribe. (See Rav Azarya Berzon's analysis at <http://www.mevaseret.org/mmy/searchshiurim.php?shiur=8>). Yehuda's commitment to the principles of *mishpat* is perhaps manifest in the incident with Tamar, his widowed daughter-in-law (see Bereishit, chapter 38). According to the ancient custom of *yibum* (levirate marriage), Tamar, who was widowed without children, was to have married a blood relative of her deceased husband. But Yehuda feared Tamar's marriage to his youngest son, after the two older sons had died after marrying her. Tamar therefore disguised as a harlot and Yehuda, not identifying her, solicited her services. When it became known that she was pregnant, Yehuda came forward and admitted that he was the father. He put his own shame aside for the sake of honesty, and to save Tamar and her unborn twins from execution. Yehuda thereby exhibited his commitment to the ideals of *mishpat* – honesty, fairness and justice.

Perhaps more obviously, Yehuda proved himself capable of the second primary role of the monarch – *milchamot*. The word "*milchamot*" used by Maimonides in this context, in its broader sense, refers generally to navigating through crises, leading a nation through periods of hardship and instability. Throughout the narrative of Yaakov's sons' tribulations during the drought, Yehuda remains silent – until the family confronts a dire situation. Yaakov's sons were warned not to return to Egypt without their youngest brother, Binyamin, but Yaakov refused to allow Binyamin to travel. When the family's food rations were depleted, it was Yehuda who stepped forward to take personal responsibility for Binyamin's well-being and guarantee his safe return (43:8-10). And, when the royal goblet was discovered in Binyamin's luggage, and Yosef, the Egyptian vizier, demanded that Binyamin remain in Egypt as his slave, Yehuda could not remain

silent. He even went so far as to offer himself as Yosef's lifelong slave in Binyamin's stead (44:18-34). During the family's most difficult hours, it was Yehuda who selflessly arose to steer the ship through the turbulent waters toward safe shores.

Yehuda is certainly not depicted as the paragon of moral perfection. He was an active participant in the sale of Yosef as a slave, and his conduct in the incident of Tamar is questionable on a number of levels. But the Jewish king does not have to be perfect. Even King David, who is, in many ways, viewed as the paradigm ruler, had his share of flaws and made grave mistakes. But both Yehuda and David were courageous leaders who led the family/nation over difficult obstacles, and exhibited unfailing honesty, especially when it came to admitting their mistakes.

The king's role is defined by his commitment to the ideals of justice and fairness, and his commitment to the physical welfare of his constituents. His responsibility, then, boils down to the pursuit of justice and the resolution of national problems. Even at the expense of his own reputation and personal freedom, Yehuda exhibited these commitments, thus establishing the model and precedent of the Jewish monarch as envisioned by Maimonides.