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Vayigash: The Daily Fountain of Youth

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The tension was mounting. The brothers couldn't understand the irrational behavior of this unknown Egyptian viceroy. Binyamin stood accused of theft and faced a lifetime of incarceration and servitude in Egypt. The brothers faced the horrible reality of returning to Yaakov, their father, without his precious, youngest son. Yehuda, acting as the spokesman, approached the Egyptian ruler (Yosef) and said, *"For how will I go up to my father if the boy is not with me? Let me not see the misery that will befall my father!"* (Genesis 44:34) Rashi explains: *"Now if you ask why I (Yehuda) enter the fray more than my other brothers, [I will reply that] they are all [standing] from the outside [without commitment], while I have bound myself with a strong bond to be an outcast in both worlds."* In last week's Parsha we read that it was Yehuda who guaranteed Binyamin's safety to his father, Yaakov. And it would be Yehuda who would face the brunt of Yaakov's heartbreak and wrath in this world and the next, should he return without Binyamin. It was in this moment that Yehuda demonstrated a core principle of leadership - responsibility. The rabbis explain that it was in this very moment that Yehuda earned the future mantle of Jewish monarchy. A leader must possess many important traits and characteristics but to be a truly effective leader one must be willing to take full responsibility for the process and outcome of events. One must be willing to wave the flag of victory and shoulder the burden of defeat.

But there is something else. Embedded in these simple words, *"For how will I go up to my father if the boy is not with me?"* is another profound and meaningful message. Rav Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye (1710-1784, Toldos Yaakov Yosef) explains: *"Koh tzarich kol yehudi l'daber el libo, 'eych e'eleh achar kach el avi she'bashamayim, vi'yimey ha'neurim eynam iti, kalu b'hevel v'rik,* (so shall every Jew say in his heart, 'how can I ascend (after death) to my Father in Heaven, and the days of youth are not with me for I have squandered them in emptiness and frivolity')."

Powerful words from a great Chassidic master. After 120 God will ask us how we used our youth. How did we use those years which were filled with promise and potential? How did we use those years of strength and vigor? Let's be honest - it's easy to be pious when we're old, tired and no longer have the desire or stamina to sin. How we used our youth - that will be the question God will ask us. The Rebbe explains that in this very moment Yehuda was lamenting all the lost years. Years that were spent covering for a crime against his own flesh and blood. Years which were taken from Yaakov and could never be returned. He lamented the youthful innocence stolen from Yosef that could never be recovered. Yehuda broke down in front of his brothers and in front of Egypt, *how will I face my father in Canaan and how will I face my father in Heaven when I know I have not maximized my youth and I have taken the youthful years of others.*

The Rebbe's words cut right to our soul. How have we used our youth? Have we actualized our unique potentials? Have we utilized our strengths and abilities? Have we maximized our youth? These are scary questions because if it turns out that we did not maximize our youth, what can we do about it now? Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter (1847-1905), known as the Sefas Emes (Pirkei Avos 4:20) explains. *"Who is a child? One who has a tomorrow."* The holy Gerrer Rebbe goes on to explain that each day is its own self-contained unit of life. We often look at a day as an incremental unit in the measurement of weeks, months and years. But in truth every day is its own cycle of life. Throughout the day we age and mature. In the morning when we wake up we are like newborn infants, by noon in our early adult years, by late afternoon we reach our mature adult and twilight years, and by nightfall we return our soul to our Maker and the unit of life has come to an end. In other words, youth is a constantly recurring state of being which begins at the start of each day. How we each decide to use our youth of any one day will determine the trajectory of that one unit of life, that one day. And even if for some reason we didn't maximize the youth of yesterday we can still do so tomorrow. We are given the great gift of youth every morning upon awakening. Our mandate is to make the most of it.

The question of *"how have I used my youth?"* need not be anxiety provoking; it just needs to be reframed. *"How have I used my youth?"* is not nearly as important as *"how am I going to use my youth in the days, weeks, months and years ahead?"*