

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion – Va-Yeishiv

Helping People Find the Courage to Speak Out

וַיִּשְׁמַע רְאוּבֵן וַיִּצְלְהוּ מִיָּדָם וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא נִכְנֹו נַפְשׁ: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֵיהֶם | רְאוּבֵן אֶל-תִּשְׁפְּכוּדָם
הַשְּׁלִיכוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל-הַבּוֹר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר בְּמִדְבָּר וְגַד אֶל-תִּשְׁלַחוּ-בּוֹ לְמַעַן הַצִּיל אֶתוֹ מִיָּדָם
לְהַשִּׁיבוֹ אֶל-אָבִיו:

[Joseph's brothers] saw him from afar, and before he came close to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes that dreamer!" ... And when Reuben heard this, he tried to save him from them. He said: "Let us not take his life." And he went on, "Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves" – intending to save him from them [later] and restore him to his father.

[Genesis 37:18-22]

Clearly, Reuben wants to save Joseph's life, but in order to do so, he must stand up to 10 of his brothers. There had to have been strong pressure for him to simply go along with the others. What do you think gave him the courage to speak out?

We know that Reuben was not successful in returning Joseph in safety to his father. Before he can rescue his younger brother, the others sell him into slavery. Still, the Torah sees fit to record Reuben's attempt to save Joseph's life. Rabbi Shlomo ibn Adret, a Spanish rabbi from the 13th century, observed:

It is from these verses that we learn that we should record and publicize the fact that someone has done a good deed. After all, the Torah saw fit to mention that Reuben acted well when he tried to save Joseph and return him safely to his father. [How much more so should we make known those instances when someone actually follows through and performs the deed!].

[Teshuvot Ha-Rashba #981, as cited in *Torah Temimah* to Gen. 37:22]

QUESTION: Rabbi Adret writes that we should publicly acknowledge when people do the right thing. Why do you think he believes that this is so important?

Are there better ways to promote a culture of moral courage than by publicizing and publicly praising specific people who display such courage, or is learning by example the best way?

Publicly acknowledging Someone's good deeds might seem to clash with other Jewish values, such as maintaining modesty and doing everything we can to avoid embarrassing those who are the helped by good deeds. How would you approach this clash of values?

The consequences of not speaking out can be devastating. Consider the words of Pastor Martin Niemoeller, who spent 8½ years in a concentration camp during WWII:

First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out, because I was not a Communist.
Then they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out, because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out, because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out, because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak out for me.