

From the Rabbi's Desk

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## Living a Perfect Life? Not for Me!

### D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah

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Our Sages teach: "There were four who died without sin: Binyamin the son of Yaakov, Amram the father of Moshe, Yishai the father of David, and Kilav the son of David."<sup>1</sup>

There are two interesting facts about these four people. First, very little or almost nothing is said about them in the Jewish Bible. Second, the four of them are referred to in relationship to someone else who was more prominent than they were: Binyamin the son of Yaakov, Amram the father of Moshe, Yishai the father of David, and Kilav the son of David.

About Kilav, for example, we read: "*He was David's son with his third wife Abigail, widow of [Nabal the Carmelite](#). Unlike the other of David's three elder sons, Amnon, Absalom, and [Adonijah](#) who were important characters in 2 Samuel, Kilav is only named in the list of David's sons and no further mention is made of him.*"<sup>2</sup>

We know about Moses, Jacob, and David. We also know about Sarah, Abraham, and Solomon. We know about Samson, and Joseph, and Samuel. But we know almost nothing about Binyamin, Amram, Yishai, and Kilav; only, according to the Sages, that they died without sin.

How do you die without sin? In other words, how do you leave this world without making mistakes?

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<sup>1</sup> See Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 55b for the full quote.

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chileab>

There is a well-known formula for not making mistakes and I am sure all of you know it. Doing nothing assures you, almost 100%, a life with no mistakes. The expression "no pain, no gain," which invites us to take risks, to take a stand, to make a difference, can be reversed to read "no gain, but no pain."

Never shake the boat, don't make waves, don't appear noticeable, never raise your hand, never volunteer, never give an opinion, and use the words *maybe* as often as possible, and you may end with a sinless life, like Binyamin the son of Yaakov, Amram the father of Moshe, Yishai the father of David, and Kilav the son of David.

Now, is there a downside to a sinless life? To answer that question, let me tell you about Thomas.

*Thomas was a very neat little boy. So much so that almost he didn't look like a little boy. He never asked too much, never pried too much. He was always clean and went to sleep when the little boys had to go to sleep. All his toys were shiny and on the right shelf. Thomas was so worried about keeping all his toys neat, he never played with them. Thomas was a little boy who was not disturbed by the flight of birds, nor by how the body worked.*

*Thomas was a very disciplined young man. So much so that he almost didn't look like a young man. He never asked too much, never pried too much, never inquired too much. He was neatly dressed and was polite to the girls and respectful of the elderly. Thomas was so worried about going over his lessons, that he never knew what he was talking about. Thomas was a young man who did not worry about the rotation of the stars or the spurt of his blood. He was always in the right mood and dealt politely with the elderly, his bosses and his subordinates. Thomas was so preoccupied with fulfilling all his duties, that he never had time to know what they meant. Thomas was a man who was not disturbed by the fate of humanity, nor by the meaning of his nightmares.*

*Thomas was a very methodical husband. So much so that he almost didn't look like a husband. Never asked too much, never glanced too much, never intervened too much, never committed too much, never gave too much. When necessary, he was ready to speak briefly, to listen briefly and to proceed briefly during the embrace. He*

*was so concerned about observing all the rules of marriage that it never occurred to him to enjoy them.*

*Thomas was a very rigorous father. So much so that he almost didn't look like a father.*

*He never asked too much, he never looked too closely, he never intervened too much, he never expected too much. He was always ready to judge and to instruct without raising his voice. He was so concerned about executing all the obligations of paternity that he was never able to meet his children. Thomas was a father who was not troubled by the frustration of his dreams nor by the possibility of war.*

*Thomas died one day in the summer. He was buried in the afternoon. By the night, they began to forget him.*

*God watched him in silence, while listening to the detailed account of his duties fulfilled. Then God sighed, for Thomas never sighed, and said: Every seven days, when you said your prayers, without missing a word, I hoped, the same as your parents, your children, your teachers, and your wife, for you to ask for something, to demand something, for you to feel something too powerful to be controlled. I hoped for you to find something or to lose something. I waited, like everyone else.*

*I waited for you to need me. But you have given me, regularly, every seventh day, the same as you have given to life: an empty devotion.*

*You are the only unforgivable failure of Creation: a man who doesn't question it. Now go, said God, go to your perfect flawless paradise. I wish to forget you as well.*

Unlike Thomas, the biblical characters we encounter in today's Torah reading, and in the Jewish Bible in general, are not perfect. They ask, they cry, they demand, they suffer, they make mistakes, they misjudge, they feel envy and resentment, they have regrets...

Unlike Binyamin the son of Yaakov, Amram the father of Moshe, Yishai the father of David, and Kilav the son of David; Sarah and Abraham, Chanah and Samuel, died as a result of sin, which is another way to say, they didn't live perfect lives.

Now, when we pray, we beseech the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. We invoke their merit despite their flawed lives. I guess we could have said: the God of Binyamin, Amram, Yishai and Kilav, but the fact is that we don't. Not sure God dislikes them, like He dislikes Thomas, but I am not sure He likes them very much either.

Our main biblical heroes are relatable, precisely because they are not perfect, because they take risks and they hope, because they volunteer and they are tested, and because they raise their hand and say *hineni*, here I am.

In ten days, we are going to hit our chests and ask for forgiveness for our many sins but let me suggest that today we celebrate the fact that our many mistakes, flaws, and disappointments, are the fruit of our doing, our inquiring, our volunteering, our feeling.

Every new year, life presents itself to us as a blank notebook, like the ones we used to bring to the first day of class when we were in school, with seemingly endless pages, ready to be written on. You can leave it blank, pristine, unused, and perhaps one day, your notebook will be a collectible; or you can write a beautiful story in it, even if you make mistakes. Remember, there is always an eraser, and you can even tear out one or two pages, here and there.

We can choose to live a life like the one Thomas lived, die sinless, and be quickly forgotten, even by God; or we can choose to take the gain with the pain, the excitement with the anxiety, the courage with the fear, the doing with the mistakes, the trying with the failing, and live meaningful lives, not too different from the ones lived by our imperfect biblical heroes.

And so, I pray:

Dear God, as we embark in this 10-day journey of introspection, give us the courage to accept and embrace the risks involved in living meaningful lives. Help us to hear an echo of Your voice in the many calls of action we encounter daily, and to have the courage to respond *hineni*, here I am.

And in your kindness, bless all of us and our loved ones with a year of action and transformation, with a year of doing and affirming, with a year of peace and joy, with a healthy, good, and sweet year.

Amen.



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