

## THE JOSEPH/JUDAH STORY - A Study of Teshuvah (Repentance)

By Joel M. Bernstein

The first word in our Parsha is *Vayigash* which comes from the verb *nagash* which means to approach, draw near, to join.

Before discussing the major content of my D'var Torah on this week's Torah portion. I was impressed by the number of times this word *vayigash*, to draw near, appears in Tanakh.

- 1.) Genesis 18:23 Abraham "drew near" to intercede with God to prevent the destruction of Sodom and Gemorrah.
- 2.) Genesis 19:2 how the inhabitants of Sodom "drew near" to break down the door of Lot's house.
- 3.) Genesis 27:27 how Jacob "drew near" to kiss his father Isaac.
- 4.) Genesis 44:18 this week's parsha's first word describing how Judah "drew near" to his disguised brother Joseph.
- 5.) 1 Samuel 17:40 David "drew near" to Goliath.
- 6.) 1 Kings 18:30  
Elijah "drew near" to God and prayed when confronting the 450 prophets of Ba'al.

All of these situations are confrontations, some in prayer, some in battle, some in disguise, and in today's parsha where Judah pleads for the safety of his brother Benjamin.

There may be more but now I would like to concentrate on my favorite character in Genesis.

From Pirket Avot, Ben Zoma would say: "who is wise? One who learns from every man, as it is written: *"from all my teachers I have grown wise, for Your testimonials are my meditations."* ( Psalms 119:99). I have prepared this sermon from the writings of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Dennis Prager, and former Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Ismar Shorsch and Maimonides. I have redacted their ideas to describe the significance of the events in the opening verses of VAYIGASH. Furthermore, the Talmud suggests that "he who reports something in the name of the one, who said it, brings redemption into the world." So as Rabbi Joseph Telushkin states "If one cites the source from whom he has learned information, then it would seem that his motive was to deepen everyone's understanding. And a world in which people share information and insights to advance understanding and not just to advance themselves, is one well on its way to redemption. (Book of Jewish Ethics) And as Dr. Larry Boxer said 2 weeks ago, the most important purpose of a D'var Torah by a congregant is to deliver a message that will be valuable and will be a take home message that might alter a person's approach to his life. In other words, what is the most important lesson that the Parsha is teaching us.

And now to begin:

It is one of the most dramatic moments in Bereishit, a book full of dramatic moments. Judah has made a passionate plea for Benjamin's release. Yes, the missing silver cup has been found in his possession. Judah does not challenge the facts. Instead, he throws himself on the mercy of the Egyptian ruler, of whose identity he is still unaware. He asks him to think of the impact Benjamin's imprisonment will have on his father. His father has already lost one beloved son. Another will surely kill him.

This is the culmination of the incredible change in the fourth son of Jacob, Judah. But the story does not start here. The sequence from Bereishit

brother 37 to 50 is the longest unbroken narrative within the Torah, and there can be no doubt who its hero is: Joseph. The story begins and ends with him. We see him as a child, beloved because he is the son of Rachel, definitely spoiled by his father; as an adolescent dreamer, resented by his brothers: as a slave, a prisoner, in Egypt; then as the second-most powerful figure in the greatest empire

of the ancient world. At every stage, the narrative revolves around him and his impact on others. He dominates the last third of Bereishit, casting his shadow on everything. From almost the beginning, he seems destined for greatness.

Yet, history did not turn out that way. To the contrary, it is another, who in the fullness of time, leaves his mark on the Jewish people. Indeed, we bear his name. The covenantal family has been known by several names. One is *Ivri*, “Hebrew” meaning “outsider, stranger, nomad, one who wanders from place to place.” That is how Abraham and his children were known to others. The second is *Yisrael*, derived from Jacob’s new name after he “wrestled with God and with man and prevailed.” After the division of the kingdom and the conquest of the North by the Assyrians, however, they became known as *Yehudim* or Jews, for it was the tribe of Judah who dominated the kingdom of the South and they who survived the Babylonian exile. So, it was not Joseph, but Judah who conferred his identity on the people. Judah, who became the ancestor of Israel’s greatest king, David; Judah from whom the Messiah will be born. Why Judah and not Joseph? The answer undoubtedly lies in the beginning of Vayigash, as the two brothers confront one another and Judah pleads for Benjamin’s release.

The clue lies several chapters back at the beginning of the Joseph story. It is there we find that it was Judah who proposed selling Joseph into slavery: and Judah said to his brothers, “What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover his blood? Let’s sell him to the Arabs and not harm with our own hands. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.” His brothers agreed (37:26-27).

Family responsibility does not come naturally. It must be learned. This is a speech of monstrous callousness. There is no word about the evil of murder, merely pragmatic calculation (what will we gain?). At the very moment he calls Joseph our own flesh and blood, he is proposing to sell him as a slave. At this point, Judah is the last person from whom we expect great things. However, Judah, and this is the core of what I am saying this morning, more than anyone else in the Torah, changes. The man we see all these years later is not what he was then. Then he was prepared to see his brother sold into slavery. Now, he is prepared to suffer that fate himself rather than see Benjamin held as a slave and he says to Joseph, “Now, my Lord, let me remain in place of the boy, as your lordship’s slave, and let him go with his brothers. How can I return to my father without the boy? I could not bear to see the misery which my father would suffer.” (44:33-34).

It is a precise reversal of character. Callousness has been replaced with concern, compassion. Indifference to his brother’s fate has been transformed into courage on his behalf. He is willing to suffer what he once inflicted on Joseph so that the same fate should not befall Benjamin. At this point, Joseph reveals his identity. We know why. Judah has passed the test that Joseph so cleverly, in his almost psychological experiment, has carefully constructed for Judah and his brothers. Joseph wants to know if Judah has changed. He has. He has passed the three tests that the sages and particularly, Maimonides have described as the three phases of Teshuvah. First, he and his brothers have admitted their guilt to God. Secondly, they have resolved to change their ways. As we see as Judah tells Jacob that he will, himself, act as surety for Benjamin and it will be his responsibility not to let Benjamin suffer in any way and to return to his father and this is the second phase of repentance. Finally, the third phase of repentance is when Judah, faced with the exact same instance of selling his brother Benjamin into slavery, he stands this problem on its head and he himself will now become a slave so that Benjamin can return to his father. Judah has learned that one of the most important things in a family is responsibility, is obligation. Whether or not he loves Benjamin is not a factor here. Judah has learned that as a brother, it is a responsibility and obligation to prevent a tragedy to his father and the way that he does this is by allowing himself to now become a slave to Joseph, whom he doesn’t even know is his brother.

As Dennis Prager has stated, “Judah has learned the meaning of. Judah is the archetype penitent, one who has learned from his errors and sins. Judah understands now, I have the responsibility to my favored better-loved younger brother. I have responsibility to a brother”.

Therefore, there are responsibilities that are inherent to family and that is what Judah has picked up here. He is also a penitent. He knows that God knows his crime. “I deserve to be a slave”, is almost what he is saying. “Not only do I owe my Dad to get Benjamin back to him, I deserve to be a slave.” I think that is part of what Judah is even saying to himself. It’s pretty clear. I am paying the price for what happened years ago in what I advocated to be done to our brother Joseph.

So, you have here a very impressive man. Thus, we have in Judah, a complete reversal of character. A transformation of what we call in Judaism, Ba’al Teshuvah, the master of return or the penitent man. This is a highly significant moment in the history of the human spirit. Judah is one of the first penitents in the Bible. The first Ba’al Teshuvah in the Torah. Where did it come from, this change in character? For that, again, let us backtrack to Chapter 38 of Genesis. The story of Tamar. Tamar, we recall, had married Judah’s two other sons, both of whom had died, leaving her a childless widow. Judah, fearing that his third son would share their fate withheld him from her, thus leaving her unable to remarry and have children. Once she understands her situation, Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute. Judah sleeps with her. She becomes pregnant. Judah, unaware of the disguise, concludes that she must have had a forbidden relationship and orders her to be put to death. At this point, Tamar, who while disguised had taken Judah’s seal, cord and staff as a pledge, (to this day, I cannot understand why the Torah would allow Jacob to give his identity to Tamar.) Would anyone having a relationship with a supposed prostitute give her his driver’s license?) and sent them to Judah with a message. “The father of my child is the man to whom these belong.” Judah now understands the whole story. Not only has he placed Tamar in an impossible situation of living widowhood, and not only is he the father of her children, but he also realizes that she has behaved with extraordinary discretion in revealing the truth without shaming him. It is from this act of Tamar that we derive the rule that, “one should rather throw himself into a fiery furnace than shame someone else in public.” (Talmud Bava Metzia 59a)

Tamar is certainly the heroine of Genesis 38, but it has one significant consequence. Judah admits he was wrong. “She is more righteous than I”, he says. This is the first time in Torah, someone acknowledges their own guilt. It is also the turning point in Judah’s life. Here is born that ability to recognize one’s own wrongdoing - to feel remorse and to change.

We now understand the significance of his name. The verb *lehodot* means two things. It means to thank, which is what Leah has in mind when she gives Judah her fourth son, his name: “This time, I will thank the Lord.” However, it also means to admit, to acknowledge the biblical term *vidui*, “confession” then and now, part of the process of Teshuvah and according to Maimonides, its key element comes from the same root. Judah, therefore, means he who acknowledged his sin.

We now also can understand one of the fundamental axioms of Teshuvah. Rabbi Abahu, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century rabbinic scholar said, “In the place where the penitent stand, even the perfectly righteous cannot stand (Berechot 34b). Proof text is the verse from Isaiah 57:19,( Shalom, Shalom Larachok Vilakarov Amar Adonoi,) This is from the Haftorah sung in the morning service of Yom Kippur. “Peace, peace to him that is far and to him that is near.” The verse puts one who is “far” ahead of one who is “near”. As the Talmud makes clear, however, Rabbi Abahu’s reading is by no means uncontroversial. Rabbi Yochanon, his teacher, interprets far, as far from sin, rather than far from God. However, Judaism has accepted Abahu’s concept that it is very difficult for a person to change. The real proof is Judah. Judah is a penitent. Joseph is consistently known as Ha Tzadik, the righteous. As a teenager, he was able to resist the passions of Potiphar’s wife. He is also quite amazing and magnanimous in forgiving his

brothers. So, he is considered a righteous man. But, according to Abahu, where the penitent Judah stands, even the perfectly righteous Joseph cannot stand.

“However great an individual may be in virtue of his or her natural character, greater still is one who is capable of growth and change. That is the power of penitence and it began with Judah”. (Rabbi Jonathon Sacks)

Maimonides in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century reiterated this in his all-embracing code of Jewish Law and added the underlying reason – the merit of the penitent is higher than that of the perfectly righteous because the former has struggled harder to subdue their passions.

And here I paraphrase the brilliant Chancellor Ismar Schorsch in August of 2001 in an address to incoming students at the Seminary, when he states, “ We all fall repeatedly short of our ideals and aspirations. It is crucial to our psychic welfare to remember that what Judaism values supremely is our struggle to overcome ourselves; and the top of its spiritual hierarchy, are not necessarily, those naturally endowed with all the right instincts or hermetically sealed off from all temptation, but those who have strayed and stumbled and fought their way back. Judaism puts a moral premium on the agony it takes to achieve a life of virtual piety. Nor is that goal quantifiable. In a profound piece of religious counsel, the rabbis who gathered at the Yavneh to revive and restructure Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple repudiated the impulse to correlate piety with any fixed commandments. Whether we succeed in observing a lot or a little, what counts is that our heart is solely directed toward God.”

It is the purity of intention of each and every single religious act which makes the difference in our lives and the world around us and not the mechanical or obsessive proliferation of such acts.

So, in conclusion, the take home message from this D'var Torah is this: by God giving us free will, he empowers us to make mistakes and all He asks is that we acknowledge our mistakes and commit ourselves not to make them again.

Shabbat Shalom.