

JUDAH: OUR NAMESAKE, OUR EVERYMAN MODEL

Parashat Vayigash, 5774, 12/7/13

The focus on Judah in our Jewish lives the past couple of weeks got me thinking. That is, the focus on “Judahs,” plural. There is Judah Maccabee, the *lead* actor of his story, the leader of the guerilla rebellion that brought Jews sovereignty in the land of Israel almost 2200 years ago. And there is Judah the brother of Joseph, a *supporting* actor in his story. The lead actor, valiant religious and national freedom fighter, shapes our experience of Chanukah. The *supporting* actor shapes our experience of something much larger, our Jewish identity as a whole. Judah the brother gives us our name, *yehudim*, Jews.

Why are we named for Judah the son of Jacob? And what can we learn about ourselves from our namesake?

Practically speaking, we’re named for Judah because most of us descend from the tribe of Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel – comprised of 10 tribes -- was destroyed in 722 BCE by the Assyrian Empire, which undertook a process of forced assimilation that rendered these tribes “lost” to the Jewish people. Left were only three tribes – Judah, Simeon, and the non-landed tribe of Levi -- which comprised the southern kingdom of Judea. The three tribes were in essence only two, Judah and Levi. Simeon was quickly absorbed by Judah soon after the conquest of the land centuries earlier, as punishment, according to Biblical tradition, for Simeon’s ruthless attack on the people of Shechem after the rape of Dinah.

From the perspective of the Biblical text, our evolution from ancient Israelites to “Jews” begins much earlier with Judah the brother of Joseph. Judah is the 4th eldest child of Jacob, son of his wife Leah, his birth announced in Genesis 29.

Please turn to chapter 29, verse 31 of Genesis, p. 174. As I read the account of the birth of Jacob and Leah's first four sons, focus on Leah's choice of names. Does anything differ Judah from the rest? READING – GEN. 31:35. Does anything differ Judah from the rest?

Now let's look at Harold Kushner's commentary on the bottom of the page. READING – NOTE 174 – ASK A CONGREGANT TO DO IT. Leah emerges from her sorrow to thank God for what she has, and bequeaths her infant son a legacy of praise and gratitude.

The first time we encounter Judah as an actor on the scene is in Chapter 37, where Judah successfully pleads with his brothers to sell Joseph instead of killing him. Let's turn to Chapter 37, verse 26, page 231. I will read in the Hebrew. READING and TRANSLATION of verses 26 and 27.

Reuben is the real hero of this story, lobbying in verse 22 for Joseph to be thrown in a pit – and, in Reuben's private thoughts, for Joseph ultimately to be saved and returned to his dad – instead of being killed. Judah is more villain than hero – as is pointed out by note 27 below -- as he is complicit in getting rid of Joseph, but he does save Joseph from fatal abandonment. Moreover, his words demonstrate the activity of Judah's powerful conscience, and his clear recognition of the terrible wrong the brothers have done. *“After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.”*

Judah, the person of gratitude, is a flawed, impressionable, here grossly mistaken, person of conscience. He sins grievously along with the brothers, at the same as we see in him the spark of *teshuva*, the turn-around that he will go through later in Genesis.

Chapter 38 interrupts the Joseph saga with the story of Judah and Tamar. We begin with a view of Judah as coldly insensitive and weak, but finish our reading with an emphasis on his conscience and contrition. Judah marries off his first son Er and then, upon Er's death

and per the rules of levirate marriage, his son Onan to a woman named Tamar. Onan also dies, and Judah ignores his obligation to give his third son Shelah to Tamar in marriage. Judah fears that Shelah will die as well, and he leaves Tamar an unmarried, unmarriageable, and aggrieved woman. In Judah's later mourning for his wife Shua, he is seduced by the disguised Tamar. Tamar becomes pregnant, and Judah proclaims that she will be killed for her infidelity to the family.

When Tamar reveals herself and her grievance to Judah, Judah acknowledges responsibility for her plight, in verse 26 on p. 237. **READING IN HEBREW AND ENGLISH.** As Rashi and Ramban (Nachmanides) point out, in saying, *tzadka*, "she was more righteous than me," Judah acknowledges not only his wrong but also Tamar's superior behavior both in word and in deed in their relationship. Judah, conflicted and scared, commits wrongs and makes someone else suffer as a consequence – but he accepts responsibility in the end and does his best to right the situation. He is again a man of *teshuva*.

Back in the role of supporting actor, this time to his father Jacob in chapter 43 of Genesis, Judah asserts himself as the undisputed leader of the brothers. Focused on saving the family from starvation, he negotiates with Jacob to allow Benjamin to return with the brothers to Egypt. At the same time, Judah shows great commitment to his father and understanding of Jacob's despair, which ultimately, I believe, permits Jacob to let go of Benjamin to the brothers. Judah swears on his life to return Benjamin to his father. He has helped cause his dad's grief, yet now seeks to relieve it. In return, Jacob has put his trust in Judah's budding leadership of the family.

In chapter 44, after the Egyptians discover the planted goblet in Benjamin's sack, Judah pleads the brothers' case to Joseph. In doing so, according to some rabbinic sources, he unloads the burden of his conscience that he has been carrying ever since the mugging and sale of Joseph. Turn to chapter 44, verse 16, page 269. **READING – 44:16.** Judah

falsely admits the brothers' guilt in stealing the goblet, and underlying that statement is an admission of the brothers' guilt for a crime long past but still fresh in mind. In privately appealing to Joseph's sympathy for Judah's father, at the end of chapter 44 in our torah portion, Judah offers himself up to Joseph in lieu of Benjamin. Look at chapter 44, verse 33-34, page 275. READING.

Jacob's welfare is paramount in Judah's address to Joseph, and it is ultimately what makes Joseph unable to hide his identity any longer. Joseph and his brothers are estranged, but still eternally bonded by the love for their father.

It is quite fitting that Jacob designates Judah – in chapter 46, verse 28, on page 283 -- to lead the way to the land of Goshen in northeast Egypt, the safe haven chosen by Joseph for residence for his family. READING, HEBREW AND ENGLISH – Gen. 46:28.

The Midrash Genesis Rabbah plays on the word *lihorot*, translated here as “to point toward,” in order to enhance Judah's scholarship credentials. *Lihorot* also means “to teach,” and the Midrash interprets that Judah went in advance of Jacob to the land of Goshen to establish a house of study, “from which teaching would flow out.”

By the end of the Joseph saga, Judah has apologized, if but in an indirect way, to Joseph for the brothers' crime. He has saved his family from starvation. He has shown great honor to his father, and been respected by his father in turn. He has taken leadership and responsibility from amongst the pack of many siblings. He's done wrong, but has succeeded in moving past his transgressions in *teshuva*. His conscience has unwaveringly pressed him. True to the name and legacy assigned by his mother, his conscience has motivated him to make right, to create a situation suitable for the praise and worship of God. Witness the God-centered language that Joseph uses after Judah's address sets him at ease.

On his deathbed, Jacob rewards Judah – in chapter 49 on page 300 -- with the greatest blessing of all his children, endowing him and his tribal successors with eternal leadership of all of Jacob's descendants, praise from the subordinate tribes and other peoples, and lion-like strength in facing down external enemies. As the Etz Chaim commentaries point out, the Davidic dynasty will emerge from the tribe of Judah, as will the Messiah, according to traditional belief.

I believe that Judah is rewarded in such a striking way for the power of his conscience, for his admission of wrongs, and for his determination to rise above his misdeeds to do the right thing. He is also rewarded for taking responsibility and leadership in his family when crisis demanded it, as we all should.

Unlike the patriarchs and Joseph, there is nothing outstanding about Judah. He is not an Abraham with his keen sense of compassion and empathy. He is not an Isaac who is a wildly successful landowner. He is not a Jacob who shines in his willingness to struggle with God and the meaning of life. He is not like Joseph who foresees the future. In our American terms, he's not a Roosevelt but rather a Truman. Judah is an everyman leader who does wrong, yet realizes it and then tries to do right. He is a person who, though not easily, prioritizes family relationships. He is a person who recognizes that one must live physically in order to thrive emotionally and spiritually.

Judah is the Jew not always at his ideal but at his most real – the story of most of our people over the generations. Judah is the story of the Jewish everyman, not the Jewish great man.

The message of our Biblical namesake is that we don't need to be outstanding. We are people who can still be good even though we do things wrong, sometimes on a large scale,

in our lives. We are people who self-reflect, are committed to Torah study, and seek the way back to the right after doing wrong. We are people who value family above all, even though we at times cause members of our family pain. We are people who take responsibility for our brethren and others throughout the world. We are people who don't live in the clouds, who stand up to practical crises of life and seek to solve them. And, ultimately, we are a positive people who bear the blessings of the Judah's mother Leah, who never steer far away from gratitude, from *hodaya*, to God for all that we have in our lives.

The patriarchs give us models we can reach beyond ourselves to touch and emulate. Judah – *yehuda*, our namesake as *yehudim*, shows us who we have within us and must be – in our family lives, in our synagogue and other Jewish communities, and in the outside entire world. An *ohr lagoyim*, a light – constant, reliable, responsible, reflective – to the nations.