

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

### Covenant & Conversation

**T**he sequence from Bereishit 37 to 50 is the longest unbroken narrative in 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 – even spoiled – by his father; as an adolescent dreamer, resented by his brothers; as a slave, then 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 else. From almost the beginning, he seems destined for greatness.

Yet history did not turn out that way. To the contrary, it is another brother 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” (possibly related to the ancient apiru), 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, 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 many chapters back, at the beginning of the Joseph story. It is there we find that it was Judah who proposed selling Joseph into slavery:

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 him with our own hands. After all – he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.” His brothers agreed. (Gen. 37:26-27)

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 selling him as a slave. Judah has none of the tragic nobility of Reuben who, alone of the brothers, sees that what they are doing is wrong, and makes an attempt to save him (it fails). At this point, Judah is the last person from whom we expect great things.

However, Judah – 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. As 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. 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 has carefully constructed for him. Joseph wants to know if Judah has changed. He has.

This is a highly significant moment in the history of the human spirit. Judah is the first penitent – the first baal teshuvah? – in the Torah. Where did it come from, this change in his character? For that, we have to backtrack to chapter 38 – the story of Tamar.

Tamar, we recall, had married Judah’s two elder 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 – send 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 child, but he also realises that she has behaved with extraordinary discretion in revealing the truth without shaming him (it is from this act of Tamar’s that we derive

the rule that “one should rather throw oneself into a fiery furnace than shame someone else in public”). Tamar is the heroine of the story, but it has one significant consequence. Judah admits he was wrong. “She was more righteous than I,” he says. This is the first time in the Torah someone acknowledges their own guilt. It is also the turning point in Judah’s life. Here is born that ability to recognise one’s own wrongdoing, to feel remorse, and to change – the complex phenomenon known as teshuvah?– that later leads to the great scene in Vayigash, where Judah is capable of turning his earlier behaviour on its head and doing the opposite of what he had once done before. Judah is ish teshuvah, penitential man.

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, 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 means “he who acknowledged his sin.”

We now also understand one of the fundamental axioms of teshuvah: “Rabbi Abbahu said: In the place where penitents stand, even the perfectly righteous cannot stand” (Berachot 34b). His prooftext is the verse from Isaiah (57:19), “Peace, peace to him that was far and to him that is near.” The verse puts one who “was far” ahead of one who “is near.” As the Talmud makes clear, however, Rabbi Abbahu’s reading is by no means uncontroversial. Rabbi Jochanan interprets “far” as “far from sin” rather than “far from God.” The real proof is Judah. Judah is a penitent, the first in the Torah. Joseph is consistently known to tradition as ha-tzaddik, “the righteous.” Joseph became mishneh le-melech, “second to the king.” Judah, however, became the father of Israel’s kings. 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. *Covenant and Conversation* is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt”l © 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust [rabbisacks.org](http://rabbisacks.org)

## RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

# Shabbat Shalom

**"Y**ou are to be acknowledged master by your brothers; the sceptre of rulership shall never depart from Judah, nor the lawgiver from between his feet...unto him shall be the gathering of the nations.” (Genesis 49:8, 10) Who is really the most important of the brothers, Joseph or Judah? At the outset of the Joseph stories, it is clear that at least Jacob and Joseph believe that it is Joseph. After all, Joseph is the

one who receives the coat of many colors from his father – a clear symbol of the birthright – and Joseph is the one who dreams that all the brothers, and indeed all the cosmos – will bow down to him. Yet, by the end of the sequence, at least Jacob has changed his mind. Judah is granted the birthright and not Joseph. Joseph seemingly accepts the situation. What happened and why?

The dramatic change in Judah is clearly delineated in the Bible. We first meet him in depth as a clever salesman, driven more by profit motive than sibling sensitivity when he cleverly suggests selling Joseph as a slave to a caravan of Midianite traders passing in the distance rather than leaving their hapless brother in the pit, waiting for the scorpions to unleash their poison. True, Judah thereby saved his brother from certain death (at least by starvation, if the pit was empty), yet we can- not overlook the fact that the brother who actually initiates Joseph’s sale into slavery is none other than Judah. Perhaps Judah should have tried harder to rescue Joseph completely! And from the moment he is sold, Joseph’s fate appears likely to be sealed; the likelihood of any of the brothers ever seeing him again is virtually nonexistent. Because of Judah, Joseph the dreamer is as good as dead, certainly to his aged father. More than two decades later, Judah makes a selfless plea to the

Grand Vizier (Joseph) that instead of imprisoning Benjamin as a slave in Egypt because the missing silver goblet was found in his food sack, he – Judah – will stand as a substitute. This reveals a total turnaround in the character of Judah. He emerges as the classic penitent, since true penitence involves correcting one’s sin at its core; if in the past he was instrumental in turning Joseph into a slave, then the only possible restoration is for Judah to now make himself a slave instead of Benjamin. The nobility of spirit demonstrated by Judah’s willing sacrifice of his own life – a spiritual descendant of Isaac on the Akeda – is enough to thrust him into a position of leadership, to cause Jacob to declare concerning Judah: “from the ‘torn’ [ Joseph], you have arisen...” (Gen. 49:9\_.

But Joseph also changes, and his change involves a newfound humility which enables him to recognize Judah’s superiority. But this change is more subtle, and requires our reading between the lines of the text. Joseph first appears as an arrogant youth, his dreams testifying to an exalted sense of self. He sees himself as king over his brothers, their sheaves of wheat bowing down to his, the sun, the moon and the planets all genuflecting before him. And as long as he dreamt dreams of agriculture in Egypt, universal power and domination, far removed from the family shepherding in the land of Israel, Joseph understood that he had constructed an internal grammar alien to his family, a language his brothers and ancestors didn’t speak. Joseph seemed a mutation, an alien revolutionary

independent of the family traditions. He was apparently gifted, but he dare not be accepted by his brothers. They were not ready to take him for what he was, a man of many colors, of manifold visions and cosmopolitan dreams. And so when his brothers sold him into slavery, they dealt with him more as a stranger than as a brother, an outsider having more in common with Esau than with Jacob. And Joseph accepted his brothers' judgement. He was truly different, a seeker after the novel and dynamic Egyptian occupation of agriculture, a citizen of the world, rather than a lover of Zion. When in Egypt, he easily accepts the Egyptian tongue, answers to an Egyptian name (Tzafenat-Pane'ach), and wears Egyptian garb. He has graduated from the family; not only are they not interested in him, he is not really interested in them!

It is only in the Torah portion of Vayigash that Joseph pulls away the mask and stands revealed before his brothers and sends for his aged father. But to understand why it takes place right now, we first have to understand why our portion Vayigash begins in the midst of one of the most tension-filled encounters in the entire Torah. Is the Torah merely interested in the dramatic effect, presenting the life and death struggle of Benjamin as a cliff-hanger, keeping us in suspense by ending the preceding portion right when it seems that there is no hope left for the wrongly accused Benjamin, whose sack of food turned out to be the hiding place of the Grand Vizier's missing silver goblet?

Judah's defense speech keeps returning to the theme of an old father waiting at home for his youngest son. The word 'father' appears thirteen times (Jacob is a father to thirteen children), an extraordinary emphasis if directed to a stranger with no knowledge of the family. Would it not have been more logical for Judah to have based his defense on the circumstantial nature of the evidence against Benjamin? Indeed, since their payment for all food purchases keeps turning up in each of the brothers' sacks, there is a clear indication that a foreign hand has taken the freedom to open their bags. Once a strange hand is moving about freely within the brothers' property, that same hand could have easily planted the evidence in Benjamin's sack. But instead of this defense, Judah sticks to one tale, the story of their family and the sufferings of their aged father. If Benjamin is a thief, why should the age or mental condition of Benjamin's father matter to the Egyptian Grand Vizier? A thief must be punished; Benjamin should have been concerned for his aged father and not have perpetrated a crime against the Grand Vizier.

Why should one expect the Grand Vizier to be concerned about the thief's ancient father?

Admittedly, the situation is extremely tense. After having nearly brought their father to his death with their sale of Joseph, the brothers dare not now contemplate returning home to Israel bereft of Rachel's second son. Judah, who promised his father that he

would be responsible for his father's youngest, initially steps forward and speaks up at the end of Parashat Miketz: "...What shall we say unto my lord? What shall we speak? Or how shall we justify ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants. Behold we shall be my lord's servants, also us, and also the one in whose hand the goblet was found." (Gen. 44:16)

Judah recognizes the 'iniquity' of the brothers, a continuation of a theme first expressed when the Grand Vizier originally confronted them with the charge that they were spies: "And they said, one to another, 'We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he implored us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us.'" (Gen. 42:21)

These words of Judah to the Grand Vizier are the culmination of this theme. Why are the brothers being mistreated to such an extent by this Grand Vizier? It is an act of God, think the brothers, obviously punishing them for their mistreatment of Joseph – measure for measure. The brothers behaved ignominiously toward Joseph, and now they must pay the price. Judah's offer that the brothers become slaves to the Grand Vizier because 'God has found out the iniquity of your servants' is a clear expression of Judah's conviction that they must all now be punished together – all but Benjamin who had nothing to do with the sale of Joseph. They must accept the will of God.

But the Grand Vizier shifts the tables on Judah. He rejects the offer of all the brothers becoming servants. He wants only Benjamin: "Only the man in whose hand the goblet is found, he shall be my servant. And as for you, go up in peace unto your father." (Gen. 44:17)

This is when Judah grows confused. According to his calculations, God was punishing the brothers as a result of the evil they had perpetrated against their brother. That is how he understood the mishaps which had befallen the family ever since they met this Grand Vizier. The way Judah surmised it, since the brothers had sinned as a collective unit, they must now suffer as a collective unit. But Joseph's singling out of Benjamin as the only brother who would be enslaved challenged Judah's perception. After all, Benjamin had never been part of the conspiracy against Joseph. He was too young; if any of the brothers were innocent, Benjamin was innocent. Why should he be the only one punished?

Now we can understand why the portion of Miketz ends precisely when it does. It has little to do with the desire to create suspense, and largely to do with Judah's new-found awareness as to the identity of the Grand Vizier. Because if it wasn't God who had planned their experiences in Egypt, it could only have been the Grand Vizier. And why would the Grand Vizier have it in for them, unless...

The portion of Vayigash opens with the words, "Then Judah stepped near unto him [Joseph], and said,

'Oh my Lord, let your servant, I pray thee, speak a word in my lord's ears...' (Gen. 44:18). Until this point, Judah had believed that the Kafkaesque nightmare they were experiencing was the result of God's punishment. Judah now realizes that this cannot be the case. He now begins to perceive the unfolding of a trail of evidence that casts new light upon the Grand Vizier's true identity. He recalls that Shimon, the brother who instigated casting Joseph into the pit, was singled out to sit in prison as a hostage after their first sojourn to Egypt for food. He now remembers how, upon their second visit, the Grand Vizier arranged their seats according to their ages when he invited them for a celebratory repast (Gen. 43:33). Only two people aside from the family who were present could have known the proper ages of the brothers: father Jacob and brother Joseph. And Jacob was in Israel!

Yes, an Egyptian, a Grand Vizier couldn't care less about an old father – unless it was his old father as well. Every word of Judah's is now calculated – and successfully earns him a bull's eye. Joseph also now recognizes Judah's profound wisdom and the ability of Judah to have pierced through his veil of deception and revealed his true identity. Judah has now emerged as the *tikkun*, i.e., repair – and thereby the most proper heir – of Jacob. Jacob's tragedy was his sin of deception, perversely continued by Joseph's pose as Egyptian Grand Vizier; Judah's mastery is his gift of cutting through the deception, and in so doing becomes worthy of the Abrahamic birthright.

The moment of Judah's understanding is also the moment of Joseph's understanding – as well as Joseph's repentance. He now sees the master plan, the divine guidance in all that has transpired. The brothers must come to Egypt not to serve him – Joseph – but rather to fulfill the vision of Abraham at the Covenant between the Pieces. The family of Abraham must live to spread the message of ethical monotheism throughout the world, but they will first return to the land of Israel which will always be the familial and national homeland. Joseph is ready now to recognize Judah's superiority, and to subjugate his gifts of technology, administration and politics to Judah's Torah and tradition. Joseph is now able to surrender his dream of kingship over the brothers and request that his remains be eventually brought to Israel. Joseph is now ready to reunite the family under the majesty of Judah. And such is the case in Jacob's blessing.

But Jacob does not express forcefully enough the vision of unity, the initial dream of Rebecca when she merged the Esau-like skins with the hands and voice of Jacob. The aged patriarch merely creates a split between the double material portion of land which goes to Joseph, and the spiritual leadership, which goes to Judah (Gen. 49:8–10, 22–26), an understandable replay of the same split his father Isaac had effectuated a generation earlier; apparently, we most often do repeat the mistakes of our parents, especially if we feel guilty

toward them and seek their forgiveness. Hence, in First Temple history, Judah-Jerusalem will separate from Ephraim-Northern Israel, and the seeds of a difficult exile were planted, whose bitter fruits would last for close to 2,000 years. And if Ephraim represented material prosperity, technological and administrative know-how, scientific and philosophical expertise, then Judah – bereft and isolated, exiled and violated – could hardly be expected to stand up to a holocaust!

However, the prophet Ezekiel, in this portion's prophetic reading (*haftorah*), provides an ultimate rapprochement – nay, unity – between all of the tribes; 'Now you, son of man, take yourself one wooden tablet and write upon it, "for Judah and the children of Israel, his companions," and take another wooden tablet and write upon it, "for Joseph, the wooden tablet of Ephraim, and all the children of Israel, his companions." And bring close to yourself one to the other, for you as one tablet, and they shall become one' (Ezekiel 37:16, 17). Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, felt the footsteps of the Messiah and the nearness of redemption. He saw in Theodor Herzl, architect of the administrative and political characteristics of the Jewish State, the Messiah from the House of Joseph-Ephraim (he eulogized Herzl as such upon his death, in his famous encomium from Jerusalem); he anxiously awaited the coming of the Messiah from the House of David-Judah, who would give spiritual meaning and universal redemptive significance to the hands of Esau which so successfully waged wars and forged an advanced nation-state phoenix-like, from the ashes of the Holocaust. Hopefully, the vision of Rebecca will soon be realized. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at [bit.ly/RiskinBereshit](http://bit.ly/RiskinBereshit). © 2025 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"l**

### **Wein Online**

**T**here is no fight as bitter as a family fight. The bitterness and scars remain long after the incident that may have originally sparked it is long since gone and sometimes even forgotten. Many times the bitterness and hard feelings remain even in generations of descendants of the original antagonists, as though somehow genetically transmitted.

Yosef and his brothers reconcile in this week's parsha. But the divisions within the Jewish people then and now are apparently never really healed and forgotten. The commentators point out that the rebellions against Moshe in the desert, that of Korach of the tribe of Levi and Zimri of the tribe of Shimon and Datan and Aviram of the tribe of Reuven, are all part of the residue - of the fallout of the tragedy of the disagreement of Yosef and his brothers.

So too is the tragedy of the splitting of the Jewish people living in the Land of Israel into two disparate and even warring kingdoms after the death of King Shlomo. In fact, the later commentators opine that all later controversies in Jewish life are but an echo of this original controversy between Yosef and his brothers.

The fact that Yaakov in his final words to Shimon and Levi recalls this dispute and its consequences to them only serves to continue the pain and bad feelings that were papered over when Yaakov came down to Egypt. But now that he is gone, the brothers and Yosef remain wary of each other, with the memories of their dispute irrevocably burned into their psyches.

Such is unfortunately the way in family disputes. That is why one must go to all lengths to prevent such disputes, no matter what or how large the seeming cause may be.

Part of the problem, in my opinion, is that in the dispute with Yosef and the brothers, one side –Yosef - was eventually right and the other side – the brothers – seemingly wrong and guilty. This feeling of guilt and being proven wrong only provokes a greater defensive attitude and a determination not to abandon the blind self-justification that led originally to the divisive incident itself.

Contrast this with the disagreements of Beit Shamai and Beit Hillel, numerous and contentious (312 of them) as they were, that never led to any sort of breakup within the society of Israel. There both sides were right, even though as a practical matter, the opinions of Beit Hillel were in the main followed in halachic practice. The Talmud proclaimed that the opinions of both groups were “the words of the living God.” By avoiding unnecessary condemnation of Beit Shamai, even though its opinions were not to be adopted and practically implemented, the Talmud guaranteed the harmony of the rabbis and of Jewish society.

Within the framework of halacha and tradition there are many varying opinions. Not all of them can be given equal weight and followed but none of them should be the basis of personal dispute and vilification. The lessons of Yosef and his brothers and their controversy should remain for us as a guide in our times and difficulties as well. © 2025 Rabbi B. Wein zt”l - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

#### **RABBI MORDECHAI WEISS**

## **Judah vs. Joseph**

**T**he prime subject of the last portions that we read in the book of Braishit is the struggle between Yehudah and Joseph. Joseph is presented to us as a person who has lofty dreams. He dreams of the stars and the moon- of a time when he will gain influence and rule over his brothers. To a great extent these dreams

resemble the dreams of his father Jacob. Jacob also dreamed of a ladder extending to the heavens and angels ascending and descending upon it.

Joseph's dreams always come to fruition. In fact, whatever Joseph sets his mind to accomplish, he is successful. When he arrives in Egypt after being sold by his jealous brothers he works for an influential person in Egypt's government. When he is thrown into jail he finds favor with the head of the prison. And when he finally interprets Pharos dream he is elevated to the position of Viceroy, perhaps the most powerful position next to the king himself. Everything that Joseph touches seems to turn to gold.

Judah on the other hand is depicted as a person of seemingly good intentions but nothing seems to work out for him. He presents to his brothers his bright idea to sell Joseph into slavery only to later be confronted by the deep sorrow of his father. He has a relationship with his daughter-in-law without his knowing, only to be shamed into admitting his guilt and to be publicly embarrassed. He finally meets his brother Joseph, only to be humiliated into owning up to his mistake of initiating and carrying out his sale into slavery-and realizing that he is standing before his long lost brother, the dreamer-and that his dreams have come true!

Yet despite the apparent shortcomings of Judah, the future king of Israel and the one whom we proclaim will lead us in messianic times, King David, is a direct descendent of Judah not Joseph. It would seem more logical that this exalted position representing the forerunner to the Messiah would come from Joseph rather than Judah!

Our sages explain that perhaps one reason for this, is because Judah possessed a sincere caring for his brethren. He was the one who ultimately undertook responsibility for his brother Benjamin and swore to Jacob his father that he would bring him back safely. Judah, by his act of caring and assuming responsibility for his brother, set the tone for all Jews to be named after him as "Yhudim", Jews, and for his descendent, David, to be designated to herald the messianic times.

But even more important - and this is the character trait that is so compelling to me and brings me to identify with Judah - is his humanness and the fact that he makes mistakes in his lifetime yet has the strength and ability to confess his wrongdoings and start over. His descendent, King David has these same personality traits. David, on a simple level - displays poor judgment with reference to Bat Sheva, and a host of other incidences as stated in the book of Samuel, but is always able to rise up from his mistakes and begin anew. His character, which is essentially the character of his ancestor Judah, is one who is represented by the typical Jew who is faced daily with religious challenges and sometimes falters and sometimes is successful. The strength of the Jew is the ability to admit wrongdoing and then start anew.

This appreciation of the fallibility of the human being is one that parents should keep in mind when judging their children and placing undue burdens and responsibilities on them expecting them to be perfect in every way. Parents very often use their children as scapegoats to realize their dreams, without concern for what is really good for their children. Teachers also, often, have unreasonable expectations of their students not allowing them to falter even one bit, without concern that they are after all only dealing with children and that everyone should be given some slack at different times in their lives. I have seen parents who make sure that their children are enrolled in every conceivable activity after school, without keeping in mind that children need some down time and space for themselves and sometimes make mistakes.

One of the strengths of our people is that we resemble and yes even aspire to the character of Judah who is not all perfect but is human in his frailties yet continually tries until he is able to ascend and reach great heights. © 2006 Rabbi M. Weiss. Rabbi Mordechai Weiss is the former Principal of the Bess and Paul Sigal Hebrew Academy of Greater Hartford and the Hebrew Academy of Atlantic County where together he served for over forty years. He and his wife D'vorah live in Efrat. All comments are welcome at [ravmordechai@aol.com](mailto:ravmordechai@aol.com)

#### RABBI DAVID LEVIN

## Yehudah Pleads to Yosef

Last week's parasha ended with a cliffhanger. The brothers returned to Egypt to gather food, yet were reluctant to return because of the condition that Yosef had placed on them, namely that they could not return without bringing Binyamin with them. Yosef plotted to capture Binyamin, his only brother from the same mother, to see how the brothers would react. Yosef had his cup placed in Binyamin's sack and then arrested him for "stealing." With that back story, our parasha begins.

Parashat Vayigash begins with Yehudah approaching Yosef to reason with him and release Binyamin. "Then Yehudah approached him and said, 'If you please, my lord, may your servant speak a word in my lord's ears and may your anger not flare up at your servant – for you are like Par'oh. My lord asked his servants saying, 'Have you a father or brother?' And we said to my lord, 'We have an old father and a young child of (his) old age; his brother is dead, he alone is left of his mother, and his father loves him.' Then you said to your servants, 'Bring him down to me, and I will set my eye on him.' We said to my lord, 'The youth cannot leave his father, for should he leave his father he would die.' But you said to your servants, 'If your youngest brother does not come down with you, you will not see my face again!' And it was, when we went up to your servant, my father, we told him my lord's words; and our father said, 'Go back, buy us some bread (food).' We said, 'We cannot go down; if our youngest brother is with us, then

we will go down, for we cannot see the man's face if our youngest brother is not with us.'" Then your servant, my father, said to us, "You know that my wife bore me two sons. One has left me, and I said to myself, Alas he has surely been torn to pieces, and I have not seen him until now! And should you take this one, too, from my presence, and disaster befall him, then you will have brought down my hoariness in evil to the grave." And now, if I come to your servant, my father, and the youth is not with us – since his soul is so bound up with his soul – it will happen that when he sees that the youth is gone, he will die, and your servants will have brought down the hoariness of your servant, our father, in sorrow to the grave. Because your servant took responsibility for the youth from my father, saying, "If I do not bring him to you, then I will have sinned to my father for all time." Now, please let your servant remain in place of the youth as a servant to my lord, and let the youth go up with his brothers. For how can I go up to my father if the youth is not with me, lest I see the evil that will befall my father?"

The term "vayigash, and he approached" seems out of place here. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that the use of the word here is unusual since Yehudah was already standing before Yosef. We are told that there are three aspects of this approach: (1) Yehudah was prepared to approach in battle, (2) he approached and prayed to Hashem for success, and (3) and he approached Yosef to appease and praise him. HaRav Sorotzkin informs us that Yehudah spoke harshly to Yosef, as he said, "may your anger not flare up at your servant." For that reason, Yehudah asked to speak in Yosef's ears so that his words would not be disrespectful in front of Yosef's entourage. Rashi tells us that Yehudah hinted that if Yosef would not agree to free Binyamin and take Yehudah in his place, Yehudah was prepared to kill Yosef and Par'oh. HaRav Sorotzkin was bothered by the interpretation that this approach was that of prayer. Should one assume that Yehudah was willing to pray to flesh and blood? No, he prayed to Hashem to afflict Par'oh and Yosef with boils as He had done to Par'oh at the time of Sarah. This was equivalent to death, as the Torah ascribes different hardships (poverty, disease) as "k'meit, like death". The Ohr HaChaim differs from this approach. He indicates that the reason the Torah uses the word "vayigash" is the simple reason that when one approached Par'oh or Yosef, one stood at a distance before the King. When Yehudah understood that he would have to speak directly to the King (Yosef), he broached that imaginary border to speak with him more privately (outside of the entourage's hearing).

The Ramban was puzzled by Yehudah's restatement of the history of the brothers and Yosef from the time that they first came to gather food during the famine. It does not appear that Yehudah was retelling the story as an excuse to free Binyamin. Instead, we see that Yehudah was analyzing the mood of Yosef as a man

of compassion and one who fears Hashem. Yehudah stressed that the brothers were reluctant to tell Yosef about their baby brother but were forced to answer Yosef's probe. Yehudah also emphasized that both the brothers and their father did not wish to send Binyamin to Egypt for fear that, would he not return, Ya'akov would die in "bitterness of soul." Yehudah offered himself in exchange for Binyamin. Abarbanel explains that this offer would have been difficult for Yosef. "Since Yosef essentially ruled over the entire country and would never do anything publicly that could be perceived as a perversion of justice, Yehudah realized that he could not publicly raise the issue of exchanging himself for Binyamin. This would be perceived as exonerating the guilty and punishing the innocent, and Yosef would never agree to it."

From Yehudah's argument, it appears that he was concerned that Ya'akov would believe that Binyamin had died if he did not see Binyamin returned to him. HaAmek Davar explains that one could read the sentence "v'haya kiroto ki ein hanar vameit, when he sees that the youth is gone, he will die" differently. In the translation that is listed here, it appears that Ya'akov would die, but it could be read that Ya'akov would believe that Binyamin had died. Yehudah understood that Ya'akov would be unconsolable if his last connection to his beloved wife, Rachel, was taken from him permanently. Even though Ya'akov would still have ten sons, this blow would have affected him irreparably.

How is it that Yehudah's argument moved Yosef to break down and reveal himself to his brothers? There were two aspects to the brothers' sale of Yosef that required repentance: (1) the rivalry between the sons of Leah and the sons of Rachel, and (2) the disregard that the brothers showed for the pain caused their father, thinking that Yosef had died. Yehudah's selfless speech demonstrated that he, who had been the brother who suggested the sale, was now the brother who accepted the responsibility to change his actions. Yehudah's actions indicate to us what we need to do in our own lives. We must examine our faults and find how we can change our actions to return to the proper Torah life.  
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**RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ**

**Migdal Ohr**

"**A**nd now, it was not you who sent me here, but G-d..." (Beraishis 45:8) When he revealed himself, Yosef's brothers were in shock. They could not have imagined that the young tattle-tale they remembered would grow into a respected leader and statesman. When they did not answer, Yosef continued to speak to them, saying they had sold him into slavery, but Hashem had other ideas and resulted in his rise to power.

The Sfas Emes says they were chagrined, thinking how they had ruined his life. If he became this

great even in the decadent land of Egypt, then surely, he would have been greater had he remained with his father, Yaakov, and studied Torah. He responded by telling them that it was precisely the challenges of Egypt which enabled his growth. They shouldn't obsess about what they did, for they did not change the outcome.

This is an important point. Though the brothers had negative intent in selling him to Egypt, their actions were really inconsequential. Hashem has a plan, and no one can thwart it simply by choosing to do so. Yes, the person has free will to take action, but the result of that action is not up to him. If a person wishes to shoot someone, but Hashem decrees otherwise, the person can miss. Maybe the gun will jam. He will be punished for his action, but because of his choice, not the outcome. That was always destined from Hashem.

Though they intended to harm Yosef, it was the catalyst for his growth. It worked just as Hashem intended. Therefore, Yosef told the brothers that they were powerless to harm him. In this message, he was teaching a much deeper lesson, too.

Why did the brothers sell Yosef? Because they hated him for his dreams of grandeur, and his talebearing to his father. They felt he was harming them, so they defended themselves by selling him. But they were wrong.

Had they realized that no one can harm you on his own, and that if someone wrongs you it originated with Hashem, they would not have been so upset with Yosef. They would have asked themselves why Hashem saw fit for Yosef to become great, or what He wanted from them, when stories of their bad behavior being shared.

When Shimi ben Gaira cursed Dovid HaMelech, he didn't get upset at him. He said, "Hashem commanded, 'Curse Dovid.'" He realized that whatever he went through came from Hashem. The fact that someone else was involved and chose to be the messenger is between that person and Hashem. He had no reason to be personally mad at Shimi because he was only carrying out what Hashem had decreed.

This was what Yosef wanted to teach his brothers. "You got mad because I spoke about you. But I couldn't harm you. The proof is that though you wished to harm me, Hashem's plan of my coming here to save the country from famine came to fruition. Therefore, don't be upset for what you did, nor for what I did. We can only regret our choices, but don't need to beat ourselves up for the result."

*When R' Leizer Yudel Finkel z"l chose R' Yeruchem Levovitz z"l as Mashgiach for his Yeshiva, Mir, some tried to dissuade him, afraid that R' Yeruchem's dynamic personality would overshadow the Rosh Yeshiva. Despite this, R' Leizer Yudel put the interests of the Yeshiva first, and hired him.*

*When these fears proved to be well-founded, a number of trouble-makers tried to cause friction between*



the two gedolim. They persisted in reporting allegations against the Mashgiach to the Rosh Yeshiva. At every occasion, R' Leizer Yudel would always react in the same way – taking no interest in anything other than what was best for Kevod Shomayim.

This selflessness, said R' Chaim Shmuelevitz z"l, Rosh Yeshiva of the Mir Yeshiva in Yerushalayim, paid off with the supernatural Hashgacha Pratis the Mir would enjoy. When most of the Yeshivos of Europe were decimated, only the Mirrer Yeshiva survived nearly intact. © 2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

#### **RABBI AVI SHAFRAN**

### **Reflections**

It is one of the hardest of life's lessons to learn, a truth born only of challenges we all first encounter in childhood but that persist well beyond: The realization that being shouldered with responsibility needn't bespeak lording but love.

Rashi comments on Hashem's repetition of Yaakov Avinu's name, calling out to him "Yaakov! Yaakov!" (Beraishis, 46:2), as a lashon chibah, a locution of endearment. The full Midrash from which Rashi quotes, though, adds "lashon ziruz" -- a locution of motivation, a pushing to action.

In last week's parshah, the Midrash has Yaakov hinting to Hashem a desire for an end to the relentless challenges that had confronted him throughout his life, regarding Lavan, Esav, Rochel, Dina, Yosef, Shimon and Binyamin (43:14). But in this week's parshah, Hashem hints back that what might seem to be burdens are in truth opportunities, features, not bugs. Yaakov's life was unimaginably hard. But by living it he became Yaakov Avinu.

With the term "Yaakov! Yaakov!" Hashem signals that being given the responsibility to shoulder challenges -- ziruz -- can be inseparable from, indeed an expression of, chibah -- love.

And that is true not only when the "pushing" is coming from Above, but also when it's coming from a parent, a spouse or a friend. © 2025 Rabbi A. Shafra and [torah.org](http://torah.org)

#### **HARAV SHLOMO WOLBE ZT"L**

### **Bais Hamussar**

When Yosef revealed himself to his brothers they were dumbstruck. The Torah describes the ensuing exchange: "Yosef said to his brother's, 'Please come close to me' and they came close. And he said, 'I am Yosef your brother whom you sold into Egypt'" (Bereishis 45:4). Rashi explains that when Yosef saw his brothers shrinking away from him, he was worried that they felt embarrassed. Therefore, he spoke to them in a gentle manner and entreated them to draw near to him.

If Yosef was truly looking to make the encounter more pleasant, why did he continue speaking so brusquely and tell them to their faces, "I am Yosef whom

you sold into Egypt"? Why bring up their misdeed at the time of appeasement?

Rav Wolbe cites the answer given by the Alter of Kelm, who enlightens us with a timely message. At some point, Yosef was going to have to make mention about what had occurred. Hence, he preferred to immediately say everything that needed to be said, so that they would be able to move on and achieve true reconciliation. Had he kept his feelings bottled up inside, there would be a constant internal barrier between him and his brothers.

In people's relationships with family members and friends, many times there are certain behaviors that irk a person to the degree that it jeopardizes the relationship. If in truth it is something trivial, then one should work on himself instead of trying to change his friend. However, if the friction was caused because the person was wronged, then it is crucial not to bottle up the feelings inside himself. Not only does such behavior not accomplish the desired result, it can also cause the bottled up feelings to explode at a later date making the possibility for a continued good relationship much harder. After receiving guidance on how to broach the topic, one should take the initiative and discuss the matter. It might not be easy, but it is short term pain for long term gain!

After being informed that his son Yosef was still alive, Yaakov packed his bags and set off toward Mitzrayim. While still on the way, the Torah tells us, "He sent Yehuda ahead of him to Yosef, to prepare ahead of him in Goshen" (ibid. 46:28). Rashi cites the Medrash which explains that he sent Yehuda to open a Beis HaTalmud, so that it would be ready upon their arrival.

Rav Wolbe points out that Yaakov obviously felt that they could not enter Mitzrayim unless there already was a Beis Medrash in working order. Why did Yaakov feel so strongly about this, to the point that he would not set foot into a country without a Yeshiva?

When the Shevatim were all in Eretz Canaan, they were living in familiar territory. Yaakov was the Patriarch of the Jewish tribe and it was relatively easy for them to maintain their own identity. They were now about to enter a foreign land and their Jewish identity would be put in jeopardy. A person's surroundings have the ability to affect a person and blur his identity. So what does a Jew in galus do?

He makes sure that there is a Yeshiva nearby.

Throughout the generations, the Yeshiva has been more than just a school designated for learning Gemara. It is the place which protects the identity of the Jewish People. Every Yeshiva is a link in the chain which spans millennia, back to Matan Torah and our forefathers (and from them back to Shem and Ever, Noach and Adam). The Yeshivos and Kollelim are the nuclei of the Jewish Nation, and creating a connection to these places is in effect creating a connection with Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov! © 2017 Rav S. Wolbe z"l and The AishDas Society