

THE LION, JUDAH

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A casual reading of the Joseph story might lead one to believe that Joseph controls the narrative; much like Macbeth seems to control the narrative in Shakespeare's play. But we know from reading *Macbeth* that Lady Macbeth actually is the controlling character for much of the early part of the play, just as Iago is the driving force of the last half of *Othello*. Thank heavens, no villains here, just human beings who, like most of us, have a point of view and an agenda and certain interests that may or may not conflict with the interests of those with whom they are forced to interact. Indeed, the point of drama is to resolve in one way or the other the interests of the interacting characters. When they do resolve, we call it comedy in the literary sense or a happy ending in the popular sense. When they do not, it is tragedy or a sad ending. These are the classical attitudes of drama as they come down to us from Greece. The story of Joseph will have a happy ending, but not before we nervously anticipate the conclusion (no matter that we know what it will be!).

In Genesis 44, it is really Judah who controls the action, in obvious but also subtle ways. He is truly a son of Jacob, possessing Jacob's powers of persuasion, manipulation and courage, and fully equal to his brother Joseph, if not in power or position, then certainly in cunning and diplomacy and faith.

A Torah tip-off to character – indeed a tip-off in any realistic narrative – is when a character quotes himself or some other character, or recounts an earlier event. This is one of the most brilliant and tantalizing skills of the biblical narrator. The way events are changed in the retelling is revealing. This is something all of us do. We are constantly rewriting history to make it conform to our view of the way the world is or should be or to rationalize or to explain why something happened the way it did. We selectively forget, add and change history.

Before we look at how Judah reworks words, let's remember who Judah was. He was the fourth child of Leah and Jacob. That is to say, no other child interrupted the order of birth between the eldest Reuben, Shimon, Levi and Judah. In fact, Leah will give up bearing children for many years until finally she has Issachar and Zebulun, Jacob's ninth and tenth children. The fifth

child, Dan, would be Jacob's, but not Leah's. Dan's mother was Bilhah, a handmaiden. So we can surmise that there is an extraordinary bond between this quartet – Reuben, Shimon, Levi and Judah. Of the four, Judah is the youngest. And we know from our Bible reading that the youngest always seems to have special qualities.

Although the well-intentioned Reuben argued for Joseph's life when the brothers threw Joseph into the pit, it was Judah who really changed the course of history by assuring that Joseph's life is spared by proposing to his brothers that they sell him to the passing Ishmaelites. This son of Leah is the one to save his half-brother. So let's ascribe two adjectives to Judah: Independent and Brave.

What else do we know about Judah? We know a fascinating story about him and his daughter-in-law which we need to consider. To be brief, Judah leaves his brothers and marries a Canaanite woman. We don't know her name, but her father's name, Judah's father-in-law, is Shua. Judah and this unnamed woman have three sons. The oldest son eventually grows up and marries a young woman named Tamar. But he dies, so Judah – in keeping with the custom – requires the second son to cohabit with Tamar. But the second son is uncooperative to say the least and the Lord strikes him dead. Now we have the third son, but Judah – considering Tamar's track record – is afraid that he may die too, so Judah tells his daughter-in-law to return to her father's house, making the excuse that the third son is too young to cohabit with anybody. So she waits, and waits, and waits. Meanwhile, Judah's unnamed wife dies and he completes the period of mourning. Tamar has been waiting and waiting. She understands that her father-in-law has deceived her and devises a plan. She pretends to be a prostitute and lures Judah into a liaison, but she requires certain personal items as collateral against the livestock which Judah promises her in payment. After all this happens, word gets back to Judah that his former daughter-in-law is pregnant. He is furious, confronts her, and intends to have her burned, but she shows him the personal items that could belong only to him and he does something very interesting. After all, he could have denied it, he could have said that someone else must have stolen his things, or he could have acknowledged it, paid her, and gone his way, or he probably could have had her executed as he was a powerful and wealthy man and she was a widow of limited means. As it happens, he not

only acknowledges it, but goes so far as to say, *She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah* (Gen. 38:26).

He had no further relations with her, but once was enough – in fact, she had twins, one of whom was Perez, the direct ancestor to King David. Again, Judah has changed history. We can add some more adjectives to our list: Honest, Self-knowing, Accountable.

Now we come to the fateful juxtaposition of this passionate, brave, honest and complex man who has changed history twice and will do so one more time. In Genesis 44:19, Judah goes on the offensive with Joseph by reminding Joseph of a conversation *that never happened*. He says to Joseph, *My lord asked his servants, 'Have you a father or another brother?'* (Gen. 44:19). But those words are simply not in the Torah. Indeed, Joseph never said anything close to that. What Joseph did say, in Genesis 42:9, was *'You are spies. You have come to see the land in its nakedness'*. Then, in Genesis 44:20, Judah says that he, Judah, said, *'We have an old father, and there is a child of his old age'*. But what did the brothers really reply back in chapter 42:13? *'We your servants were twelve brothers, sons of a certain man in the Land of Canaan; the youngest, however, is now with our father, and one is no more'*.

What does Judah hope to accomplish by misquoting Joseph? He cleverly shifts the atmosphere from one of confrontation to one of personal connection. He imputes motives of concern and caring to Joseph. He levels the playing field by trying to appeal to the person within the politician. He cannot hope to sit down at the table with Joseph as an equal, since Joseph holds every card in the deck - the food, as well as literal power over the brothers' very lives. So, in effect, he changes the nature of the interview from that of a negotiation, which has strict rules, to that of a personal conversation, which has none. Little does Judah know how successful he is. Notice as well that in 42:13 Judah refers to twelve brothers when only ten were standing before Joseph, thereby giving the impression of solidarity and evoking sympathy from the Egyptian ruler. Interesting too how he completely ignores the circumstances of what he believes to be Joseph's death. Remember, Judah is speaking to the same man whom he believes to be dead. It's incredible drama.

Now, when the ten brothers originally undertake the first interview with Joseph in Egypt, who speaks for them? The Torah simply doesn't say. They

all speak in a sort of chorus. So, in the entire story of Joseph in Egypt, when is the first time that a brother is identified as the speaker? It is Reuben, who reminds the brothers that it was he who had warned against killing Joseph: "I told you so." Yes, Reuben addresses his brothers, but it is Judah who has the courage to address Joseph. Why does the responsibility for the diplomacy fall on Judah? Well, Reuben does not have the courage to speak to Joseph. It is true that he originally tried to save Joseph's life and intended to come back to rescue him, but he left the brothers at the most crucial moment of all, when Joseph is sold to the Midianites. Reuben is nowhere to be found. Which brother becomes the first hostage and why? Joseph does not choose Reuben. Why not? Perhaps he is grateful to Reuben for standing up for him when Joseph was a young man. But I believe that Joseph, who is a keen observer of others, believed that Reuben was too fundamentally weak and probably unable to endure incarceration, that he would crack. Reuben, it turns out, is someone who says the right thing, earnestly tries to persuade others to act, but never actually puts his own life on the line. He is a man of good intentions, but history moves much too quickly for him. He needed to stay by the pit but abandoned Joseph at the one moment when Joseph needed him most. Reuben will forever be a footnote to the Joseph story, the nice guy who never seals the deal.

So who is the one brother who actually steps up to the plate, almost literally sticks his neck into the noose and says, "Take me"? It is the same brother who took it upon himself single-handedly to convince Jacob to let Benjamin go. It is the same brother who offers himself as a pledge for Benjamin. It is the same brother who conceived the idea of selling Joseph, realizing that that would be the only way of preserving Joseph's life which would be acceptable to his angry brothers. What an ingenious connection to the story of Tamar! There he offered his possessions as a pledge. Now he offers his own body as a pledge. And he does so with the same sense of self-accountability as he exhibited then.

Now, in this third interview with Joseph, it is this same brother who steps up and says, *Therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord instead of the boy, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father unless the boy is with me? Let me not be witness to the woe that would overtake my father!* (Gen. 44:33-34).

This is Judah – the one who dreamed up the idea of selling his brother as a slave is now offering himself as a slave. It is in the character of Judah that the story of Joseph comes full circle, the exact meaning of the Hebrew word *tshuva* – to turn.

As we just noted, Judah began this soliloquy with some shading of the truth. We can imagine Joseph listening carefully to the speech, stone-faced at first. After all, every word uttered at court is written down and can be verified. Furthermore, Joseph, a highly intelligent and shrewd man, remembered their interchange. Judah may have thought that because Joseph did not understand Hebrew, that he might blame any misunderstanding on a poor interpreter. But Joseph does understand every word for Hebrew is his native language. And when Judah finally tells the truth, quoting Jacob accurately in 44:27-28: *'As you know, my wife bore me two sons. But one is gone from me, and I sad: Alas, he was torn by a beast!'*, Joseph's face no doubt softens in the memory of those evil times but also in love for his old father, and in recognition that his brothers, or at least one of them, brings atonement and redemption.

Judah is the pivotal figure of the Joseph story. Had he acted otherwise, it is quite conceivable that Joseph would have turned his back on his brothers, given them enough food for their father's sustenance and then sent them back to Canaan, remaining in Egypt as the Egyptian viceroy with his Egyptian wife and sons. It is only because of Judah that Jacob comes to Egypt and returns Joseph to the very heritage by which all of us are known, the children of Israel, but also the grandchildren of Judah, Judeans, Y'hudim, Jews.

Most of us are Monday morning quarterbacks like Reuben – see, I told you so, I told you not to kill Joseph, I said they should have gone for it instead of settling for a field goal. I was going to, I almost, I wanted to. Like Reuben, we are experts at what everyone else should have done. Reuben is us. Judah is what we might be.

So the answer to the question – why does the responsibility for the diplomacy fall on Judah? – is simple. It falls on Judah because he *chooses it*. Reuben suggests possibilities. Judah effects realities.

Perhaps that is why the name of Judah is so closely connected to the name of the Almighty. There is not much difference between the Ineffable Name *yud-hey-vav-hey*, and *yud-hey-vav-daled-hey*. Judah is inspired by God Himself.

It is true that Joseph ascribes everything to God. In response to Judah's confession, we have Joseph's revelation, a revelation wholly based upon his faith in the way God works in the world: '*So, it was not you who sent me here, but God . . . and He has made me . . . ruler over the whole land of Egypt*' (Gen. 45:8). What brother ever makes reference to God? None, not one, not ever.

However, Joseph, while he acknowledges and praises God, understands God only as working to save him, his family and his nation. He does not appear to understand, as his father and grandfather did, that God has a plan for the Jewish *people*, a destiny which can take place only in Israel, only through the Torah, only in freedom. He acknowledges God's power, but misunderstands it or too narrowly interprets God's promise. This is what deprives Joseph from being considered a leader, a patriarchal figure. This is why Joseph would be forgotten, and why it would be for another Egyptian to partner with God in the fulfilling of the destiny of our people, a people named for Joseph's heroic half-brother, the one whom Jacob called "the lion", which is what Judah surely was.

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