

What does it mean to be a Jew?

I don't mean the status questions of "who is a Jew?" Of course, there is a time and a place for that discussion. But the word Jew, Yehudi in Hebrew, come from the territory of Yehuda, of Judah, in the ancient kingdom of the twelve tribes. Of all of those tribes, Judah was the largest, and was the name by which the whole people were eventually called. I could go into the historical reasons for that, and it would make an interesting shiur, an interesting class, but tonight I actually want to talk about what it means to be a Jew in light of the mythical character of Judah, who figures prominently in this week's parasha.

Last week's parasha, Miketz, saw Joseph rise to power in Egypt, and a famine come to the entire known world, touching even the land of Canaan, where Joseph's family still dwelled. His estranged brothers came to Egypt seeking food, leaving only the youngest brother Benjamin - Joseph's only full brother, the only other son of favored wife Rachel - home with their father. Joseph recognized them and accused them of being spies. When they told their story, he demanded that they bring their younger brother as proof that they are who they claim to be, and kept one of the brothers hostage to ensure their return.

They returned only after the famine had become even more severe, due to father Jacob's extreme reluctance to part with the only remaining son of his favored wife. Judah promised Jacob profusely to bring him home safely. But at the end of the last parasha, Joseph planted a golden goblet in Benjamin's sack of grain, accused him of stealing it, and threatened to take him as a slave and send the other brothers home without Benjamin. With that cliffhanger, the parasha ends.

And, so this parasha, Vayiggash, begins, poised at this moment of tension.

Vayiggash eilav Yehudah vayomer - And Judah approaches him, and said. . . So begins one of the most eloquent monologues in Torah. The song, “oh no, not he, how you can accuse him is a mystery” from “joseph” doesn’t nearly do it justice.

Judah actually doesn’t attempt to plea Benjamin’s innocence. The goblet was indeed in Benjamin’s sack. Instead, he recounts the history of the family’s journey into Egypt, their father’s reluctance to part with his “only son, Benjamin, and his sure knowledge that if they return without Benjamin, Jacob will die. He pleads with Joseph to have mercy on their father - the father, who as far as Judah knows, this commanding Egyptian officer has never met. He even offers himself as slave in Benjamin’s place, if only to spare the pain of his father.

What is remarkable about this monologue is not only its intrinsic pathos, but its context. This is the same Judah who was so jealous that he was willing to sell Joseph as a slave and report him killed by a wild animal to his father. And now he has come to a place where he can say unflinchingly, “Benjamin is the only son my father has left.”

As one of my favorite commentators, Nechama Leibowitz, wrote, it is inconceivable that Jacob, who had already been punished for his favoritism of Joseph, could have explicitly said to the ten sons of the other wives that Benjamin was his only son. But Judah’s statement is still accurate, given how distraught Jacob was at the prospect of losing Benjamin - and only of losing that son. *“Even if*

*Jacob had not uttered these words, Judah was giving a faithful picture of his father's feelings."*

What must it have taken for Judah to make such a statement? What must it take for Judah to not only forgive his father the blatant favoritism, but still care for him enough to advocate for the return of the favored son?

Vayiggash eilav Yehudah. And Judah approached him. The jealous brother, who once sold his half-brother into slavery on account of favoritism and dreams, now willingly steps forward, and offers himself as a slave.

The *Sefas Emes* has a beautiful commentary on those opening words of the parasha:

"eilav" "To him"— refers in the plain sense to Joseph. But also, "to his own Self—to himself." And also, "—to God." For indeed, Judah said nothing new in his speech, had no legal plea to make to Joseph. Nevertheless, since he accessed the reality of his narrative, salvation came to him."

That moment of approaching Joseph, to debase himself, to beg for his brother's freedom, to tell the raw story of his family, would surely be one of the most painful moments in a human life. And yet, I think there is a psychological truth to the Sfas Emes commentary. In speaking that truth to Joseph, Judah is able to look at himself, to approach himself. He is able to finally say without bitterness, 'This is who I am. This is the family situation that I come from. I am not the favored child. I have done terrible things. But I can still do this.'

And so also “to God.” Because it is in those rawest moments of our own unguarded self-revelation that we are flooded with the Divine. It is when we let go of the stories and shields that we use to guard ourselves against having to encounter our realities, when we look at our frailties and our histories and say, “we are marked, and yet we can still speak,” that God is there.

And so, we are not Josephites. Joseph is called Yosef HaTzaddik, Joseph the righteous one. We are called Jews. Our people is descended from these mythical stories of sibling rivalry, of the favored younger son usurping the place of the elder, but we finally come to this, to Judah, who is not perfect, not righteous, not the best loved, but finally able to face himself, his parents and his brothers, without bitterness. With only tenderness.

And so what if to be a Jew to to be a spiritual descendent of Judah? Flawed? Not always favored, maybe not even always chosen. But still able to be full of love. Still able to speak truth, to ourselves, to our neighbors, to God? How might that effect the way we come together in community? How might that affect the way we study our own history? How might it affect how we talk about Israel, about the Jewish future?

Could we live with this?