

*Sermon delivered at Biannual Convention of the
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I have always been fascinated by the figure of Judah as he winds his way through the last part of *Bereshit*. He appears to me as a rather mysterious person, riven by inconsistencies: on the one hand—dark, introverted, somewhat reckless, impetuous; and on the other—a born leader, powerful, “a lion,” head of the Tribes of Israel, progenitor of King David and the Messiah. He is both, of course, and that is what makes him so interesting as well as so important. But in order to understand him, we have to view him as one would a moving picture rather than a snapshot. Judah is a story in progress.

When we first meet Judah, he is in an untenable position. He was denied official leadership of the brothers because Reuben was the first-born and, by the rights of primogeniture, was the presumptive leader. Then there was Joseph, the *designated* leader as his father's favorite and the son of his father's favorite wife, Rachel. Joseph wore the כתונת הפסים—not just a fancy and colorful sport jacket but the uniform identifying the wearer as the heir apparent of the father. Yet *functionally* he, Judah, was the unofficial leader—with all the additional responsibilities that such unannointed role carried.

In his conduct, Judah appears considerably less than admirable. Two events mark his life as a failure, as a moral debacle. He is the propelling force in the selling of Joseph, and he is disgraced in the matter of the Tamar affair. In each case, he suffers a shattering shock at having his sins bared. Consider how deeply embarrassed he must have felt when Joseph revealed himself—“I am Joseph your brother”—and Judah was the very one who said “Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites!” And how terribly chagrined he must have been when Tamar exposed him! He had unilaterally condemned her to life-long celibacy (it occurs to me that she was the first *agunah* in Jewish history!), and when he discovers she is pregnant he immediately assumes she is an adulteress and he forthwith orders her execution. Then he discovers, to his everlasting shame and dismay, that he is the father, that the harlot was the disguise of Tamar who was completely within her rights in demanding יבום that he, Judah, marry her (the law in Jewish society before the Torah was revealed at Mt. Sinai.)

Clearly, his life is a moral tragedy. And he must pay for it—and pay dearly. Look at the way the Torah, by the deft use of language, subtly informs us how Judah, as it were, must eat his own words. The brothers—undoubtedly led by Judah—gather to inform their father of the death of Joseph (בר' לז:לב-לג):

וישלחו את כתנת הפסים ויביאו אל אביהם ויאמרו זאת מצאנו בנך הוא אם לא; ויכירה ויאמר כתנת בני חיה רעה אכלתהו טרף יוסף

And they sent the coat of many colors and brought it to their father and said, "This we have found; know now (הכר נא—acknowledge, identify it), is this your son's coat or not." And he acknowledged it (ויכירה) and he said, 'It is my son's coat; an evil beast has devoured him, Joseph is certainly torn to pieces (Gen. 37:32).

The key word is הכר נא. And then the *identical* language is used against Judah by Tamar who says: ותאמר הכר נא למי החתמת והפתילים והמטה האלה

And she said, acknowledge (הכר נא) whom these belong to—the signet and the cords and the staff. And Judah acknowledged (*va-yakker*) them and said, "She is more righteous than I" (Gen.38: 25).

The use of the verb הכר is thus quite deliberate. (And again, in the end, when the brothers meet Joseph for the first time under radically new circumstances, we read the same play on the הכר root: ויכר יוסף את אחיו והם לא הכירו ("And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they recognized him not"—Gen. 42:8.)

Moreover, when Judah says to Jacob, "הכר נא—acknowledge—is this your son's coat or not?," he is deceiving his father though not quite lying to him; it is Jacob who is forced to conclude that חיה רעה אכלתהו טרף יוסף, it must have been an evil beast that devoured him. Later, when Tamar presents Judah's tokens to him—הכר נא, as if to say, "Acknowledge this: here are your wallet, ID card, credit cards, and check-book"—he realizes that now *he* has been deceived without quite being lied to!

The lesson: Judah is the culprit, and he must redeem himself, painfully and completely, lest he remain the eternal culprit, forever stained by his failures.

But that is by no means the end of the story of Judah. In the end, surprisingly, he becomes the acknowledged leader of the Tribes of Israel, and progenitor of the House of David and the Messiah. Why? *Because Judah rises above his failures, he atones for his sins and goes on to greatness. He redeems himself.* The same Judah who counseled his brothers to sell Joseph into slavery now offers his freedom and his very life to save Benjamin, Joseph's full brother. The same Judah who sought out a harlot and was dismayed to learn it was his daughter-in-law Tamar whom he had wronged, and whom he had peremptorily ordered executed for suspected adultery—the same Judah openly and immediately confesses his terrible mistake. Realizing his dreadful error, he publicly concedes to Tamar, saying, צדקה ממני, "She is more righteous than I" (Gen. 39:26); צדק must now be done, and the price is my confession and restitution and her exoneration. Only then can I go on to my destiny.

Judah has now overcome his deficiencies. He has learned from his mistakes. Judah is a study in growth, in development, a case study in how to overcome moral vulnerability and emerge all the stronger. And note well: the Torah *accepts* him in his new role; it does not thereafter condemn him to a life of endless and fruitless regret. So צדק means that justice must be done, but also

that the sin is not indelible; תשובה is possible. צדק means there must be no *whitewash*; but also that there must be no permanent *blackening* of one's reputation, no invitation to despair over the future.

Martin Buber once said: "There are people who enjoy success after success, and they are failures. And there are those who experience failure after failure and they are successes." Judah exemplifies the latter.

Solomon said, שבע יפול צדיק וקם--"Seven times the righteous man falls and gets up" (Prov. 24:16). On which great Hasidic thinker R. Zadok of Lublin comments, the "fall" of the righteous person is ירידה לצורך עלייה, "a descent for the purpose of [a later] ascent." The fall (יפול) is part of the getting up (וקם); it is, in the simile of an earlier Hasidic source, the backing up of the runner as he prepares to lunge forward and win the race. Which means that a failure overcome, a disaster studied and understood, a mistake pondered and corrected, leads to and eventually becomes part of the ultimate triumph itself. In the heavenly calculus of moral life, failure is often the stuff of success.

On his death-bed, Jacob looks back on the critical events of his life, and sees Judah's development in a new perspective: גור אריה יהודה מטורף בני עליה, "Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up" (Gen. 49:9). What is Jacob driving at in this poetic metaphor? Rashi explains it best: ממה שחשדתיך "מטורף"--בטורף טרף יוסף... וזהו יהודה שנמשל לאריה. The "prey" is an allusion to Jacob's words, which he later suspected were inspired by Judah, that Joseph was torn apart by a wild beast. And the word of Jacob עליה, "you have gone up," is meant to imply, as Rashi puts it: "עליה"--עלייתך--את עצמך... וכן מהריגת תמר שהודה צדקה ממני, you, Judah, emerged from your misdeeds with strength; you grew morally and "you have gone up" spiritually from your two dreadful failures.

I would add one more allusion in the word עליה, "you rose up." It refers to the beginning of Judah's unfortunate dalliance with Tamar disguised as a harlot. The Torah begins that story with one significant word: ויהי בעת ההוא וירד יהודה מאת אחיו--"And it came to pass at that time, that Judah *went down* from his brethren (Gen. 38:1). Judah "went down"—not that he turned southward, but that he here began his moral descent, his spiritual downfall. So now that he has done תשובה, his father says: עליה, you have indeed reversed direction; you are now on the way up. Judah's rehabilitation is symbolized by his transition from וירד--"went down" to עליה--"gone up"; it consists of having learned from his mistakes and having made amends.

Imagine, now, if Judah had failed to offer his life for Benjamin, and if he had failed to confess to Tamar. Imagine if the Almighty had decreed that Judah must never emerge from his guilt and must wallow in the mud of his contrition forever—the people of Israel would never have benefited from the magnificent centuries-long leadership of the House of Judah!

The rebuilding of one's life and reputation is never an easy matter. There is much grime to clean away, much regret at time lost and effort wasted, hard and lonely attempts to repeat what was once done and then undone and must now be redone. But precisely because of that, it is a nobler and more sacred task. As the Midrash put it, במקום שבעלי תשובה עומדים אין צדיקים גמורים יכולים לעמוד, "even the completely righteous cannot attain the place of those who sinned and repented."

The same principle emerges from a consideration of Hanukkah. Why, one may ask, do we dedicate eight days every year to celebrate the *rebuilding* of the בית המקדש and hardly anything for *original* building of the Temple in Jerusalem? The answer is that precisely because it is so much more difficult and thankless, the rebuilding and rehabilitation are that much more praiseworthy. When the Temple was first built by King Solomon, there was great joy and celebration, drama and excitement, a sense of destiny and history, novelty and freshness. But it left hardly any mark on Jewish history—other than a brief mention in a Haftorah read once a year on שמעני עצרת. When the בית המקדש was *rebuilt* under the Hasmoneans, it required an armed revolt of the few against the many, the poorly equipped Jews against the heavily armed Syrian-Greeks and, even worse, a painful civil war of the loyalists to Torah against the Jews who assimilated to Greek paganism. No drama, no inspiring media circus, no sense of novelty, no awareness of contributing a glorious new page to history—just hard and dedicated labor. It is that event, the rebuilding and all the blood and sweat and cleansing from impurities involved, that left a permanent and most happy legacy to Jewish history—the celebration of Hanukkah every year for the last thousands of years.

So let us all listen carefully to what the Torah is telling us with regard to Judah and what Jewish history is telling us with regard to the celebration of Hanukkah. Mistakes, grievous mistakes, are often made. They must be acknowledged and corrected and amends made—a very painful process, always. But they must not be allowed to drag one down to the earth, permanently wallowing in the swamp of woeful self-renunciation and self-abnegation, wasting one's talents and potencies and thus squandering one's enormous potentials for future achievements.

Eventually, having acknowledged the past, one must rise—"Seven times the righteous man falls and gets up"—and use the lessons of failure to grow ever greater: from "יפול-fall" to "וקם-get up," from "וירד-went down" to "עלית-gone up." The Torah demands of us confession and restitution, not masochistic vengeance. It encourages us to hope, not despair. Torah is, as the Talmud (*Shabbat* 88b) put it, סמא דחיי, "the elixir of life," not סמא דמוות, a poison that causes death.

That is the lesson we must take with us from this study of the life of Judah and the significance of Hanukkah. We must take the elixir—the medicine, bitter though it be—and it will give us life: long life, creative life, successful life. A life of holiness.