

A-353

"STRUGGLE AND TRIUMPH"

## A Study in Jewish Character

A 353

Throughout the life of Jacob, Joseph was the undisputed favorite amongst his sons. And in today's portion, when we read of Jacob about to close his eyes forever, Joseph still seems to be the favorite recipient of Jacob's paternal love and affection. With all his sons gathered about him to bid him a final farewell, Jacob has only the most generous sentiments <sup>to offer</sup> to Joseph. "Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine by a fountain." He offers his beloved son the blessings of the God of his father, the blessings of heaven above and "blessings of the deep that couches beneath." He tells him that "the blessings of thy father are mighty beyond the blessings of my ancestors unto the utmost bounds of the everlasting hills; they shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of the prince amongst his brethren." And yet despite all this unquestioned and unquestioning love, the careful student of the Torah notices something strange. And that is, that the greatest prize that Jacob had to offer, the most significant reward that he had to bestow upon one of his children, was given not to Joseph but to another of his sons. The prize of Malkhut, of kingdom or leadership, that of being the chief of the brothers, went to Judah.

Why is this? Why, despite all the genuine love that the father felt for Joseph, the son, did he give the gift of royalty to Judah?

Allow me to share with you this morning an answer given by one of the distinguished Jewish thinkers of our generation, my own revered teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik.

Joseph and Judah are two archetypes, they represent two totally different character types. Joseph is, as our rabbis called him, Yosef ha-Tzaddik -- Joseph the pious, the righteous. He is a man who from his earliest childhood had in him ingrained virtue, inherent piety, naturally good habits. His moral

"STRUGGLE AND TRIUMPH"  
A Study in Jewish Character

Rabbi Norman Lamm  
1/16/60 - Shabbat Vayechi

and ethical goals and code were evident to him from his earliest infancy. And he had no doubt but that he would follow them.

Judah presents quite another picture. His way in life, especially his moral life, was not so smooth. He found that he had to struggle with himself, that he was constantly and unceasingly engaged in an inner battle. He realized that innately and naturally he was possessed of certain destructive tendencies and that only by warring against these original inclinations could he ultimately triumph over them and arrive at a state of decency and honorableness.

Just compare them. When Joseph finally meets his brothers, seeing them for the first time after their treachery towards him, there is no feeling of vengeance within his heart. On the contrary -- he ultimately acts towards them in a fatherly manner. Yet how did Judah act towards Joseph when Joseph was in dire straits <sup>and</sup> at the mercy of his brothers? True, Judah did not favor the murder of Joseph. But neither did he plead for his liberation. Instead he said, Mah betza ki naharog et achinu -- what profit will it be for us if we will kill our brother; better, let us sell him. So incensed were the sages of Israel at this crass materialistic attitude of Judah that they applied to him the words of David: Botzeia berekh, nietz ha-shem -- whoever praises this profit-seeker or compromiser, blasphemes the Lord.

Or compare their moral characters. Joseph, despite his youth and despite his distance from his father, finds that in this strange land when he is seduced by the wife of Potiphar, he can easily resist the temptation. He is a model of good behavior and decency even if it costs him his freedom. And yet how disturbed are we every year when in the same portion that we read of Joseph's moral heroism, we read of Judah's moral

"STRUGGLE AND TRIUMPH"  
A Study in Jewish Character

Rabbi Norman Lamm  
1/16/60 - Shabbat Vayechi

failure. Judah has no compunction about consorting with a harlot who ~~ultimately~~ <sup>later</sup> he discovers to be his daughter-in-law, Tamar. It is a revelation to us of an inherently immoral streak in the character of Judah.

And yet, ultimately, despite the great differences in innate character, Judah ~~arises~~ rises very high indeed. On both counts that we have mentioned, he pleads guilty. He freely confesses, and offers to make amends to the best of his ability. He thus transcends his original limitations. Judah struggles -- and triumphs! And at long last, after a long episode of inner struggle, he arrives at the Tzidkut of Joseph, the level of righteousness with which his younger brother was born.

And it is just because of this reason that Judah receives from his father the gift of Malkhut, of leadership. The ability to lead men and guide them <sup>through</sup> ~~to~~ their daily toils and prosaic woes, through the labyrinthian channels of ordinary experience, is usually the possession of one who has himself experienced failure, who has learned to wrestle with his natural limitations and to overcome them, who has learned how to struggle and triumph. One who, like Joseph, is born a Tzaddik, a saint, who is from the beginning perfection itself -- that kind of person may fail to appreciate the heroism required of his more human followers. And if he cannot appreciate the effort that he demands of them, then he is incapable of true leadership.

It is Maimonides in the seventh chapter of "The Laws of Repentance" who has formulated this principle as a part of our Halacha: Amru Chachamim: Makom she-baalei teshuvah omdim ein tzaddikim gemurim yekholim la'amod bo -- mipnei she-hem kovshim et yitzram yoter me-hem. "Our sages said: The repentant individual stands on a higher level than one who is completely righteous from the beginning -- for the repentant one has had to apply a greater degree of control and suppression of his initial evil inclinations."

"STRUGGLE AND TRIUMPH"  
A Study in Jewish Character

Rabbi Norman Lamm  
1/16/60 - Shabbat Vayechi

What God wants is not only the <sup>final</sup> ~~ultimate~~ good deed, but also the dynamic process of achieving the good deed by having the Yetzer ha-Tov, the inclination towards good, engage the Yetzer ha-Ra, the evil inclination, in a life and death struggle -- and ultimately triumph over it.

And perhaps we might even find that these two different basic character types of Joseph and Judah come to them by heredity from their <sup>respective</sup> mothers. Joseph is the son of Rachael, of whom it is written that she was Yefat toar vi-yefat mareh -- beautiful of figure and beautiful of appearance. She easily and quickly won the heart of her husband. She found that she had to exert no effort but that from the very beginning she was able to <sup>gain</sup> ~~achieve~~ the love of Jacob. Whereas Judah is the son of Leah, of whom it is written: Ve'einei Leah rakkot -- the eyes of Leah were red. And as the Targum explained, they were red from weeping. She cried in protest at her bitter fate. She had to undergo an excruciatingly long struggle to win her husband's heart. With every child she bore him she gave the child a name which in some measure reflected her conscious or unconscious frustration and hope. She had to overcome her initial plainness of appearance and lack of brilliant charm, that her sister did have, in order to arrive at a state of happiness.

And if we now analyze the character of the Jewish people, we will find that our people have been more the descendants of Judah than of Joseph. We Jews have never maintained a feeling of racial superiority, that we are born perfect and remain perfect. Just read through all the writings of our prophets and you will see emphasized again and again a constant reproach against our people for their stubbornness and stiff-neckedness, for their tendency to backslide and slip once again into the clutches of paganism. We are very, very far from perfect. But that is precisely why we have a

"STRUGGLE AND TRIUMPH"  
A Study in Jewish Character

Rabbi Norman Lamm  
1/16/60 - Shabbat Vayechi

Torah: to train and guide and teach us, to be a weapon in our struggle with our more base nature. The Torah has been the historic character building program of the Jewish people. No wonder the Talmud says, in a surprising turn of phrase, that Lamah nitnah Torah le-yisrael, mipnei she-hem azzin she-b'umot -- "Why was the Torah given only to Israel and not to other nations? -- because Israel is the most impudent of all peoples." God wanted to teach the world the value of Torah. So he gave Torah to an impudent people, a people whose basic nature was coarse, to show that Torah can ultimately retrain, reguide and transform this character into something noble and something elevating. It is because of Torah that we have developed eventually a kind of collective character that will not permit us to perform the kind of genocide that other people have proven capable of. It is because of Torah that our people are so committed to racial equality. It is because of Torah that our people are such impassioned champions of social justice. It is not because we always were so -- but because Torah has trained us how to struggle and how, ultimately, to triumph.

How important that idea is for each and every one of us here today. Who knows, perhaps there is someone here who in some ways is like Joseph: a Tzaddik, one who is naturally predisposed to the right way, the decent action, the honorable course. I dare say, however, that most of us are normal human beings, endowed with normal failings and natural human inadequacies. And yet -- we are descended from Leah and Judah, we are the people of Torah. We must learn to struggle, to triumph, to overcome, and to build our characters.

Perhaps there is someone here who naturally is indolent -- let us call it by its usual name: lazy. To him or to her the Sedrah says: By sheer will power you can overcome that native aspect of your character.



"STRUGGLE AND TRIUMPH"  
A Study in Jewish Character

Rabbi Norman Lamm  
1/16/60 - Shabbat Vayechi

Perhaps there is someone here who is given to the sharp word, the razor-edged phrase, the biting rejoinder. To him Torah says: You can learn the art of being gentle and soft.

Perhaps there is someone who is given to an uncontrolled temper, to falling into a rage. Our Sedrah tells him this morning: There is no excuse for temper. With training, you can learn how to control it.

This indeed is one of the most significant and effective techniques yet developed in our Jewish ethical literature, especially that of Hassidism. R. Elimelech of Lizensk has taught the principle of Shevirat ha-ratzon: the breaking of one's own will. The only way to transform one's character, to <sup>one's</sup> elevate ~~his~~ own inner nature, is by going on a conscious and concerted campaign against it. For indolence, Rabbi Elimelech suggests a campaign of forty days in which one rises an hour earlier than usual, reads half an hour longer than his normal span, and gets himself to perform more and more of the tasks that he ordinarily neglected. If one starts like Judah, but also wants to conclude like Judah, the way is: Shevirat ha-ratzon. The man of biting sarcasm must undertake consciously a generous attitude and generous word. The man of temper must expose himself to provocative situations and still retain his equanimity. Shevirat ha-ratzon is the way for an imperfect Judah -- it is not needed by the already perfect Joseph. What Judah teaches us, and what every true leader must understand, appreciate, and have experienced himself, is -- that wilful, purposive improvement of character is possible; that it is not <sup>impossible</sup> ~~only possible but advisable~~ to transform one's initial personality and change it for the better. It is not only not impossible -- it is absolutely mandatory.

And how encouraging to know that not only Leah and Judah, but throughout history this streak of character of Judah has been uppermost in the life of

"STRUGGLE AND TRIUMPH"  
A Study in Jewish Character

Rabbi Norman Lamm  
1/16/60 - Shabbat Vayechi

our people. Just look at David, who achieved Malkhut by virtue of his descent from Judah. Here was a man who had raging within himself almost uncontrollable passion. The immoral and the saintly were engaged in a life and death struggle. And despite initial imperfections and later failures, what ultimately triumphed was the soul of the sweet singer of Israel.

As a matter of fact, many sources in our traditional Jewish literature speak not of one Messiah in the future, but of two. They are: Messiah Ben Joseph -- the Messiah who will be descended from the tribes of Joseph, and Messiah Ben David -- the Messiah descended from David and the tribe of Judah. Messiah Ben Joseph, our tradition tells us, will come first -- but he will soon be killed by the enemy in the great struggle preceding the Messianic Age. Messiah Ben David will come later, lead his people in the great battle, and ultimately triumph and survive. Messiah Ben Joseph, representing the pure, the noble and the perfect, will find that despite all the loftiness for which he stands, he cannot survive in the battles of real life. Messiah Ben David, descended from David and from Judah -- two people who began life as failures and learned to overcome their inner limitations -- he, with this kind of experience in his blood and in his <sup>e</sup>gens<sub>^</sub>, will learn how to lead his tired and weary people to great historic victories which will usher in the Utopia of all history.

Jewish character has always been formed, not <sup>found</sup> ~~created~~; molded not inherited. Jewish virtue is something you must build, not expect to be born with. Persistence and perseverance have been our way to make up for initial imperfection.

Yehudah, ata yodukha achekha -- ~~you~~, Jew, you who follows in the footsteps of father Judah: Only by the same way of Shevirat ha-ratzon, of breaking your own original will for evil, of rising above original infirmities, of struggle

"STRUGGLE AND TRIUMPH"  
A Study in Jewish Character

-8-

Rabbi Norman Lamm  
1/16/60 - Shabbat Vayechi

and triumph, will you earn the gratitude of a world of men and women who will have learned from you how to transcend the weakness of soul and how to attain moral, ethical and spiritual greatness.

For this is the secret and the goal of Jewish Malkhut, Jewish leadership in the world of men.