

## Vayigash 2010 – Judah – Why we are Named After Him

I was six years old and the new kid in the kindergarten, my family having just moved to a new house causing me to start in a new school. It was recess and I was out with all the other children, when I heard it – the voice of an older boy, yelling across the playground to me – “Hey you, new girl. I heard you’re a Jew. Is it true? Are you a Jew?” Up until that moment, when I heard the tone in that boy’s voice, I did not know that the word “Jew” could be used as an insult. I thank God that even at that young age, with the fear that that tone evoked, I had the courage to proudly say: “Yes I am a Jew. Why aren’t you?” He laughed and walked away, but the moment was seared into my memory.

Ever since then I have wondered about the name that was hurled at me as an invective. What does it mean to be a Jew? And as I got older and became a rabbi, I have often thought about why it is that of all Jacob’s twelve sons, we B’nei Yisrael the Children of Israel are called Jews. Of course I know the historical reason. When Solomon’s sons broke the kingdom in two, the northern portion of the land was called Israel and the southern portion, where Jerusalem lay, was called Judah and later Judea after the tribe of Judah. But if I believe that God wouldn’t allow us to be called by any name other than that which He desired, I have often tried to understand what it was about the character, the person of Judah that resulted in us being named after him.

Therefore I have to turn to the Torah itself in order to search for answers. Over the past couple weeks, as the portions of Vayishlach, and Vayeshev were read, we have slowly been getting reintroduced to the man who gave us our name. His story culminates in this week’s portion Vayigash, when he serves as the interlocutor between Joseph and his brothers. In looking at Judah’s life, it becomes apparent very quickly that he was neither a genius nor a saint. But he was a practical and decent human being, who through his actions during three tests emerged as one who possessed not only charisma and honor, but the ability to take responsibility for his actions, three important qualities.

The first test took place when 9 of Jacob’s sons decided that they wanted to kill their brother Joseph. While Reuben, the first-born convinced the brothers not to kill Joseph with their own hands, Reuben’s suggestion that they bring Joseph back to Jacob was unrealistic and therefore rejected by the brothers. Imagine how life in the household would have been if Joseph had returned home, saying his brothers had tried to kill him, threw him in a pit, etc. It certainly wouldn’t have lessened the hatred between the brothers. Things undoubtedly would have only gotten worse. Judah knew he had to do something to save his brother, something realistic and practical. That is why he turned to the brothers and said: “What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let us not touch him ourselves, for he is our brother, our own flesh” As Professor Jacob Klein of Bar Ilan University wrote of Judah’s actions, “Here Judah seizes leadership, gives practical advice of the lesser-of-two-evils type. His behavior can hardly be called gallant, but unlike Reuben he does not operate by tricking his brothers [with a suggestion that is clearly not possible] but by making a suggestion which he can stand by honorably and with credibility. In the knowledge that it would be useless, he does not attempt to oppose his brothers, but exploits the situation--the chance passing of the Ishmaelites--and acts quickly and decisively.”

Judah's second test was one that unfolded over the course of many years. After Judah's eldest son Er married Tamar and then died, he gave his second son, Onan, to her as part of the ancient ritual of a levirate marriage in which a man married his brother's childless widow in order to produce children. When Onan died too, Judah and Tamar were both in a bind. Judah had one more son named Shelah, who was, at the time of Onan's death, not yet of marriageable age. When he finally became of age, Judah was afraid to give Shelah to Tamar in marriage lest he die too. Too scared to tell Tamar the truth, he just hoped she'd forget about it. Of course she didn't and in desperation she eventually tricked Judah himself into having sexual relations with her in the hopes of getting with child. When it was revealed that Tamar was pregnant, Judah ordered her to be executed for adultery, something not exactly fair for him to do since she wouldn't have had to commit adultery if he had let Shelah marry her. Despite this seeming imperfection, it is here that he displays one of his best qualities. As Tamar is being led to her execution she sends Judah the signs of office that he had given her as an IOU when he had engaged in relations with her. At this point Judah had two options: ignoring the truth, and letting an innocent person die to save face, or taking responsibility. He chose the latter course, saying: "She is more in the right than I, because I did not give her to Shelah my son." From their union Judah's son Peretz was born, and it was from Peretz that the dynasty of David would eventually arise. Thus we see one of Judah's greatest qualities – he admitted the mistake which he made, does not attempt to justify himself, and takes responsibility.

The third test took place when the brothers first went down to Egypt during the famine. When the 10 brothers came to Egypt during the famine, Joseph recognized them while they did not recognize him. While Joseph did give the brothers food he also told them not to return unless they brought Benjamin down as well. Of course Jacob did not like this plan and wanted to refuse, afraid that if Benjamin went down to Egypt he would lose him, as he already lost Joseph. Judah intervenes, saying "Send now the boy with me, and let us be on our way, that we may live [since they will be able to buy food in Egypt] and not die, both we and you and our little children." In case this practical suggestion was not enough, he offered himself up by saying: "I, myself, will be his guarantor; you may demand him of me. If I do not bring him back to you then I will have sinned against you forever." (Gen. 43:8-10) His sincerity moved Jacob to trust him, enabling Judah and the brothers to return to Egypt and get food for the rest of the family.

But the third test had two parts – he first had to convince Jacob to let Benjamin go down to Egypt and then he had to safely return Benjamin to Jacob. At the beginning of this morning's parashah, that safe return is in dire jeopardy. Joseph has framed Benjamin as a thief, placing a gold goblet in his bag and then insisting that Benjamin stay in prison in Egypt. This was a situation very similar to the one they had all found themselves in 22 years before. Here Judah again speaks in a way to ensure the safety of his entire family. As Esther Feldmar once wrote, "[Judah] appealed to Joseph's emotions in order to rouse his mercy for their father, and stressed the father's advanced years and deep emotional bond with the youngest brother. Four times he repeats the phrase that the father's life is bound with that of the younger brother, and emphasizes that separating the two would lead to the father's death. He included in his speech the personal confession that Jacob had disclosed to his sons in his hour of distress – "As you know, my wife bore me two sons" (Gen. 44:27). Judah knew that even the most stubborn of men would not be able to withstand the idea of an elderly father who all his life has been longing for his beloved lost son...He concluded his words with the heart-rending cry, "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. 44:34).” As someone who had himself lost two sons, Judah could not bear to watch his father suffer as he had. This great empathy and compassion aroused him to speak in a way which broke through Joseph’s emotional wall.

Through these tests Judah emerged as the leader of the Israelites because he possessed three overriding qualities: practicality, the ability to take responsibility for his actions, and trustworthiness. He also possessed the people skills and the ability to get others to see things from his point of view by employing simple rhetoric. This is evidenced by the way he moved his brothers and his father to all do something they originally didn’t want to do just by uttering the right words.

These qualities alone make Judah the clear leader of Jacob’s sons and therefore the one whom we should be named after. But there is one final aspect of Judah’s personality that was inherent in his being from the moment he was born. You see, Judah was Leah’s fourth born son. Each of the sons’ names is explained in the Torah. We read: “The Lord saw that Leah was unloved and he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. Leah conceived and bore a son, and named him Reuben; for she declared, “It means: ‘The Lord has seen my affliction’; it also means: ‘Now my husband will love me.’” She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, “This is because the Lord heard that I was unloved and has given me this one also: so she named him Simeon. Again she conceived and bore a son and declared, “This time my husband will become attached to me, for I have borne him three sons.” Therefore he was named Levi. She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, “This time I will praise the Lord.” Therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped bearing.”

Our Etz Hayim Chumash has an interesting comment on this passage. We read: “The names of Leah’s first three sons reflect her frustrating rivalry with her sister for the love of the husband they share. The reasons given for her choice of names for the first three children say nothing about her hopes for them but focus solely on how the births will affect her marriage. Now, with a fourth son, her mood changes from rivalry to gratitude, so she names him Judah (*Y’hudah*) from a Hebrew root meaning “to praise.” In the future, the descendants of Jacob will be known as Judeans, or Jews (*Y’hudim*). Yochanan stated, “From the beginning of time, no one ever thanked God as Leah did” Her heartfelt prayer of thanks reflects her having grown from self-concern and a focus on what she lacked to a genuine sense of appreciation of what was hers.

When I combine this “attitude of gratitude” with Judah’s qualities of practical action in the face of difficulty, the ability to accept responsibility and follow through on promises made, people skills, and a gift with words, I realize indeed that it is no accident that our people is called the Jewish people and that we as individuals are called Jews. That is what Judah’s name means, that is what it means to be a Jew, someone who sees all of life as a gift, each moment another moment when rather than despair we should rejoice in the simple act of being and act in the best, most decent, caring, and honest way we can. I began this morning by recalling the first time I had used the word Jew uttered as an insult hurled at me. Over the years I have heard and read the words of other anti-Semites. But I have learned what they will never know or understand – to be called a Jew is never an insult. It is a compliment, a badge of honor I wear with pride each day.