

Joseph, Judah and Us: Thoughts for Parashat Vayiggash

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayiggash

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

This week's Torah reading features a confrontation between two brothers—Joseph and Judah. Joseph had contrived to arrest Benjamin and keep him in Egypt. Judah approached Joseph with an impassioned plea to save Benjamin, volunteering himself to stay as slave instead. Joseph is so moved by Judah's words that he reveals himself as a brother. As the story unfolds, Joseph's brothers return to their father Jacob and the entire family relocate in the land of Egypt.

In his thoughts on the Parasha, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz contrasts Joseph and Judah. Joseph was handsome, the favorite of his father; he went on to become a high official in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. Joseph is known in Jewish tradition as Yosef Ha-Tsaddik, Joseph the righteous. He was an exemplary person. By contrast, Judah was far from perfect. The Torah describes Judah's sinful behavior toward Joseph, and toward his daughter-in-law Tamar. Yet, Judah was the only brother with courage to confront Joseph to plead for Benjamin's freedom. Rabbi Steinsaltz suggests that Joseph typifies a Tsaddik, a naturally righteous person; and Judah represents a ba'al teshuva, a sinner who has turned from a sinful past and has emerged as a righteous person.

Joseph was handsome, wise, and righteous by nature. By contrast, Judah had to overcome faults. His strength was in his ability to rise up after failure. He could admit error and improve his ways.

Joseph and Judah, in a sense, symbolize the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. One set was shattered by Moses when he found the children of Israel worshipping a golden calf. The other set remained intact as Moses brought it down a second time. The Talmud states that the broken pieces of the first set were placed in the ark together with the intact set (Berakhot 8b). Both, together, served as the spiritual foundation of Israel.

Similarly, Joseph—the intact set—and Judah—the broken tablets—jointly serve as models of leadership. Joseph is blessed with unblemished righteousness. He is dignified; he has amazing organizational and managerial skills; he leads by setting an example of righteousness and efficiency. Judah leads by dint of his resilience, determination and courage. He learns from his mistakes. In times of crisis, Judah rises like a lion, fearless and strong.

We need the Josephs and the Judahs working together for the wellbeing of our people and our world. We need honest, talented leaders like Joseph; we need courageous and forceful leaders like Judah.

But for our people to flourish, we not only need Josephs and Judahs. We need an entire community committed to the highest values of our tradition. We need to raise a new generation of Josephs and

Judahs-- proud, capable and courageous Jews. Each of us has a role to play.