Lions and Laggards: Thoughts on Parashat Vayhi

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayhi

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

This week's Torah portion includes Jacob's last words to his sons. He described his fourth son, Judah, as a lion, and stated that the scepter of kingship would never depart from Judah (and his descendants). All the brothers (and their tribes) would turn to Judah for leadership. What did Judah do to deserve this singular role?

The answer may be suggested in the story of Joseph's threat to keep Benjamin in Egypt as his servant. The brothers, believing that Joseph was a ruler of Egypt, were in a terrible quandary. They knew that their father Jacob would be devastated by the loss of Benjamin. They knew that they had to find a way to confront Joseph and make him change his mind.

Reuben was first born. He had a strong, impetuous personality. Why didn't he come forward? Apparently his bravura abandoned him at this moment of crisis.

Simeon and Levi were prone to violent action. They wiped out the men of Shechem. Why didn't they challenge Joseph? Apparently, their courage melted when facing a regal opponent.

Issachar, according to rabbinic tradition, was the family's great Torah scholar. He devoted his days to study and spiritual contemplation. Why didn't this man of God stand up to Joseph? Apparently, his holiness and scholarship did not lead to making him fit for courageous action.

Zebulun, according to rabbinic tradition, was an expert businessman. With all his financial acumen, why didn't he try to make a deal of some sort with Joseph? Apparently, his business skills failed him at this desparate moment.

Indeed, all of the brothers failed to muster the courage and quick-wittedness to stand up to Joseph and fight for their brother Benjamin, for their father Jacob, and for the honor of their family. All except Judah.

Judah's life before this crisis had not been one of uniform courage or brilliance. The Torah makes careful note of his various failings. Yet, Judah's personality undergoes a gradual development. He is able to admit error. He is able to stand up against his brothers in their plan to murder Joseph. And at the critical moment, when Benjamin's life is at stake, only Judah comes forward to challenge Joseph and to risk his own life in the process.

Judah argues with eloquence. He is poised and articulate. He tells Joseph that he will stay in Egypt as a servant instead of Benjamin, but that Benjamin must be returned to his father. Judah is so persuasive and so sensitive to the feelings of his father, that Joseph can no longer hold back tears. Joseph cries. He tells his brothers who he really is. The brothers reconcile. All because of Judah's courage. Judah is a lion. He has the presence of mind and the strength of character that all the other brothers lacked. In that one moment, Judah proved himself worthy of kingship.

All of us face crises in life. All of us confront problems. Many, like Judah's brothers, find themselves unable to take responsibility, to make necessary sacrifices, to act with courage. Many, like Judah's brothers, have various talents--and yet they allow themselves to be silenced in the face of challenge. We need to learn from Judah's example. We need to understand that leadership requires clarity of thought, unshakeable commitment to what's right, and a lion's courage to take action. If kingship was assigned to Judah, the Torah calls on all of us to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." We must be lions, not laggards.

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