

Parshat Vayigash
Sibling Rivalry: on Joseph and Judah the Righteous
Dr. Liz Shayne - Class of 2021

There is a longstanding debate in my parents' house, an argument that is usually friendly, but often fierce, and one that I invite you all to participate in this year. Take a moment, dear readers, and consider how you would answer the following question: Who is the better person, Joseph or Judah?

Now, and I hope you have taken the time to come to your own conclusions, let us consider these two men, both where they are at the beginning of Vayigash and where they have come from. We begin with Judah, whose moment it is to shine at the beginning of this week's parsha. Judah is a true leader of his brothers, a man who takes responsibility for those weaker and unable to defend themselves. As we saw last week, he knows how to reassure his father of his leadership and devotion, and this week, he stands up to the viceroy of Egypt to defend both his brothers and the idea of justice. This is a far cry from the man who sold his brother into slavery and lied to Jacob about it. And he has come so far since he first turned his life around and saved his daughter-in-law Tamar's life by taking responsibility. If we measure goodness by growth, Judah's righteousness is truly extraordinary.

But what about the man Judah stands up to, the grown-up boy whom he sold into slavery seventeen years ago? Joseph was a child of destiny, a boy who dreamed twice of his own ascendance and was not afraid to talk about it. The favored son who becomes the slave who becomes the prisoner who becomes the viceroy, Joseph goes from the lowest of the low to the highest of the high. Personal advancement, however, is not the same as goodness. According to the rabbis, seventeen year old Joseph told tales about his brothers and would get them in trouble with their father. And while we might see echoes of that boy in Joseph the Viceroy, we also see Joseph who forgives his brothers and sees the Divine plan in all that has happened. Joseph too is also an example of goodness--so much so that he is known as Yosef HaTzadik in the rabbinic literature. Shai Held, in *The Heart of Torah*, points out that Joseph grows from a callow youth who thinks his destiny and good looks are merely for his own aggrandizement—a boy who never mentions God—into a man who recognizes that his gifts at interpreting dreams and helping others come directly from God. Even in Joseph's most selfish action—the way he appears to punish his brothers when they come to him for help—the Abravanel on Bereishit 42:7 explains that Joseph put an extraordinary amount of thought into how he dealt with his brothers in order to bring them and their families down to Egypt safely while still ensuring they were no longer the same kind of people who had sold him into slavery. And, most importantly, his forgiveness of them is absolute. From this perspective, Joseph grows into a true leader who wields power wisely and acts to bring God's will into the world. He saves his brothers and Egypt from famine and his forgiveness of them is utterly sincere.

I hope I have provided everyone with some food for thought and I invite you, if you happen to be at a Shabbat meal, to use this question as an icebreaker to get to know one another better. But in my race to compare these two great men, I have overlooked the strangeness of finding both of them in the same story. Looking at these stories in parallel, it is clear that Judah and Joseph trace very similar character arcs. They both grow from selfishness to selflessness. They both become

leaders in hard times. And they are both chosen to be leaders within B'nei Yisrael, with Joseph receiving the double portion of the firstborn and Judah becoming the progenitor of King David. So what does this doubling teach us? Why do we need two versions of the same story?

The answer may lie in the individual variations between the two narratives. If we look back at how they have grown, we notice an important distinction between what Judah and Joseph need to learn. Judah needed to learn to take responsibility, while Joseph needed to learn to act for others and not just for himself. Judah learns to step up while Joseph learns to step back. Joseph's gift is the gift of foresight; he can see the future in a way that allows him to act properly in the present. Judah's gift is the gift of the present; he can act in the moment in a way that creates the future. When Joseph began, he could see his future in the sheaves of wheat and heavenly bodies, but gave no thought as to what that future was for or what he was meant to do with that authority. When we first meet Judah, he already has the ability to make decisions that alter lives forever, but gives no thought to their consequences or what he owes to the people experiencing those consequences. Yet by our parsha, both brothers have learned to properly use their gifts. Joseph's foresight saved Egypt and his entire family, while Judah's responsible decisions allowed him to protect his brothers and his family. It is both men using their God-given gifts not only to the best of their abilities, but also for the right reasons, that saves the future Jewish people.

And that is why we need both of them. It can be all too easy to see a single mold of leadership as paradigmatic or, worse, prescriptive. If this was only Joseph's story or only Judah's, we might see their example as the only method of leadership out there. Moreover, the narrative doubling moves us away from the idea that there can only be one leader and one person whose actions move and save a people. Joseph and Judah are successful because, in the end, they learned how to do the next right thing and how to do it together. May we take the message of this parsha, learn to use our gifts in the service of God, and learn to work together to build the future.

Shabbat Shalom

P.S. But, at the end of the day, you have to admit that the better of the two was J_____



Dr. Liz Shayne comes to Maharat after getting her Ph.D. from the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is a Wexner Graduate Fellow/Davidson Scholar and is currently interning at the Hebrew Institute of White Plains. Liz received her B.A. in English literature from the University of Pennsylvania and did her doctoral research on how digital editions are changing the way we feel and experience books. She has taught lectures and classes on topics ranging from the history of the Gemara to technology in science fiction. At Maharat, Liz is taking her research on the relationship between learning and technology out of academia and into the world of Jewish education. She loves discovering new online editions of the Gemara almost as much as she enjoys learning from a sefer. Though she misses Santa Barbara, Liz is glad to be

back in New York, where she grew up. She and her family now live in Riverdale, where she can be found most Shabbatot, slowly teaching her daughter to sit through all of Torah reading.