

In one of the most poignant scenes in the entire Torah, Joseph finally makes himself known to his brothers. What takes him so long, and why does he first engage in such an elaborate ruse? The answer may be found in the short, but highly significant admonition with which he sends his brothers off to get their father and the rest of their family and bring them to safety in Egypt: “*al tirgezu baderech* Don’t get angry on the way.” (Chapter 44:24) The verb תִּרְגְּזוּ means to become angry, or to be annoyed, and indeed, these men harbor a whole laundry list of reasons to be angry with themselves and with one another, as Joseph overhears during their first encounter in last week’s parashah. They view their current predicament as the consequence of their actions toward Joseph and begin to argue over who is more at fault for what happened. Having learned and grown through his own vicissitudes, Joseph is able to offer his brothers paths to repentance.

The stories of the four oldest brothers, who feature in this narrative, are profound character studies. They are all impulsive, each in his own destructive manner. Firstborn Reuben, intent on proving his worthiness to his father, is stunningly shortsighted. He argues against killing Joseph and suggests throwing him into a pit instead, intending to fetch him out and return him to Jakob. Does his devastation at finding Joseph gone when he returns to the pit cause him to rashly offer Jakob the lives of his own sons should Benjamin not be safely returned? His sexual encounter with co-mother Bilhah, although not relevant to this story, is another example of his impetuosity. In the matter of Schechem, Simeon and Levi have already proven themselves capable of horrific violence. Rashi argues that Simeon and Levi, who in these stories are always mentioned together, were also the main instigators against Joseph, and that Simeon was the one who ultimately pushed him into the pit. Joseph realizes that he must separate them to prevent further evil scheming. Building on this, the Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser – 1809-1879) suggests that Joseph wishes to punish his brothers collectively measure for measure by accusing them of spying just as they had once accused him of talebearing, and to additionally give Simeon an opportunity to repent his particular deed by showing him the pain of imprisonment. Judah, the 4th brother, turns out to be the one who grows the most. When a caravan approaches, he suggests selling Joseph as a slave rather than leaving him in the pit. His words are chillingly mercenary: “What will we gain if we kill our brother ...?” (Ch. 37:26-27) But at the beginning of our parashah, it is he who eloquently offers himself in place of Benjamin. What has brought about this radical change? Midrash Tanchuma Vayigash 9 explains by embellishing the story of Judah and Tamar, which interrupts the Joseph narrative right after the brothers present his bloodstained coat to their father. In it, Jakob believes that Judah had killed Joseph. Therefore, HaShem tells Judah, “Until now you had no sons, and did not experience the grief caused by sons, but since you tormented your father, and deceived him with the words ‘Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces,’ by your life, you shall wed, bury your children, and suffer the grief that comes with children.” Indeed, Judah suffers much, and it changes him for the better. He now understands what he has done to Joseph and in an act of repentance offers himself as a slave in place of Benjamin. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l sees Judah as the Torah’s first *baal teshuvah* (penitent), and points to another meaning of his name, which derives from the verb *lehodot* (to thank) – to acknowledge. Judah has experienced empathy for his father, overcome his resentments, and taken responsibility for his actions. He is ready to assume leadership.

The profound transformation of both Joseph and Judah has broken the destructive pattern of sibling rivalry, paving the way for new relationships. Joseph grows from callow, spoiled youth to earn the appellation *ha-tzaddik* (the righteous one), but Judah’s transformation is even more spectacular. He will become the ancestor of kings. Our troubled world needs more Josephs and Judahs to counteract the impulsive, egoistic Reubens and Simeons and begin a long overdue healing process. We can start by learning from our mistakes, acknowledging our shortcomings, and engaging in peaceful communication with our fellow human beings.

Shabbat shalom!