

How appropriate to be reading this parashah at the darkest point of the year! It is a narrative of downward spirals largely caused by blind disregard for the feelings of others. Jakob, whose life had been impacted by his parents' blatant favoritism, unwisely perpetuates this unhealthy pattern with the sons of his beloved Rachel, especially Joseph. Duped by his sons into believing that Joseph has been killed, he will descend into years-long darkness from which he will never fully recover. Favored son Joseph, decked out in his extravagant coat and gifted with the ability to interpret dreams, is naively unaware of how his eagerness to share the content of his own vivid dreams rankles his already jealous brothers. And the evil tales he tells Jakob about the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah only add insult to injury. He blithely goes at Jakob's behest to check on his brothers and the flocks. They are pasturing in Shechem, a dark place of misfortune for our people, as Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin 102a reminds us: "Shechem is a place ordained for calamity. In Shechem, they tormented and raped Dinah, in the outskirts of Shechem the brothers sold Joseph, in Shechem the kingdom of the House of David was divided." Indeed, Joseph winds up in the abject darkness of the pit into which his irate brothers throw him, after which they sit down to eat, blind to Joseph's anguish. He is saved by Judah's intervention, pulled out of the pit, sold to the passing Ishmaelites (and/or Midianites, cousins all, and who all have a hand in his further sale), and taken down to Egypt (another descent with overtones of darkness, both physical and spiritual) and sold to Potiphar, Pharaoh's chamberlain and chief of his slaughterers/cooks (people associated with the darkness of death and of the kitchens). Joseph emerges into the position of responsibility his talents and HaShem's protection have propelled him. But at the height of this first success, he is seemingly as blind to the effects of his good looks as he is to the dangers of dealing with Potiphar's wife and his own understandably mixed feelings when she tries to seduce him. Remember the *shalshelet* that wavering Torah cantillation sign of indecision over "he refused" (39:8)? Midrashim vary on whether he actually succumbed to her wiles, but most say he did not, crediting a vision for saving him from sin. "At that moment his father's image came and appeared to him in the window. It said to him, 'Joseph, the names of your brothers are destined to be written on the stones of the ephod, and you are to be included among them. Do you desire your name to be erased from among them, and to be called an associate of promiscuous women?' ... because of Joseph's ability to withstand this trial, he merited to become a shepherd of the Jewish people." (Talmud Tractate Sotah 36b) He still descends into the darkness of prison, where he again has occasion to call upon his ability to interpret dreams. There we leave him until next week's parashah, when he will emerge into a power he cannot begin to imagine. Judah, who convinces his brothers not to let Joseph die in the pit, experiences his own form of darkness. Although the story of his dealings with his daughter-in-law Tamar bisects Joseph's story just as he has been sold to Potiphar, our sages believe that it is there for a reason. When Judah is "demoted" (from ירד to descend) by his brothers for his actions, he turns away from them, falls in with an Adullamite man, and fathers three sons with an Adullamite woman. Midrash Tanchuma Buber says that his brothers, embroiled in the darkness of their family dynamics, see how Jakob suffers believing that Joseph is dead, and blame Judah: "You told us to sell him. Had you told us to return him, we would have obeyed you." Since Adam and Eve, blaming others has caused untold darkness and despair. Judah marries his oldest son Er to a woman named Tamar; Er dies because he is "evil in the eyes of the Lord." She is then married to Onan, who likewise dies. Talmud Tractate Yevamot says that both sinned by "spilling their seed" before ejaculation, Onan because he "knew that the progeny would not be his," and Er so that pregnancy would not make her less beautiful. Fearful of also losing his youngest son, Judah sends Tamar to live with her father until he grows up, but when she realizes that he has no intention of giving this son to her, she disguises herself as a prostitute. Once again, Judah turns away from his path, and Tamar becomes pregnant with his child, taking his signet, cloak, and staff as collateral. Midrash Genesis Rabbah: "HaShem said to Judah: 'You said to your father, 'do you recognize it? [Joseph's coat]' I swear that Tamar will say about you, 'do you recognize it. [his collateral]'" Judah understands this lesson of reciprocity and acts honorably toward Tamar, earning the kingship for himself and his descendants. Judah is the first to emerge from his family's darkness, charting a new course for himself and for his family. It is noteworthy that all but 9 of the verses in our parashah begin with the letter *vav*. This year, starting on Sunday evening we will light the *shamash* (attendant) candle and with it we will light the first Chanukah candle, adding one more candle every evening for 8 days until on the following Sunday evening 9 candles will burn brightly in our *chanukiyot*, illuminating the darkness. By accepting responsibility for his actions, Judah led the way out of the darkness, teaching us that we can all learn from our mistakes, and guiding us toward making wise decisions when we face darkness and obstacles in our own lives.

Shabbat shalom!