

Nearly lost in the high drama of this parashah is the story of the profound transformation of its two main protagonists, Joseph and Judah, without which their fractured family would never have been able to come together. Both have spent the last 22 years dealing with justifiable feelings of resentment and guilt. Outwardly Joseph is thoroughly Egyptian in speech, appearance, and behavior; he has an Egyptian name and an Egyptian wife, and he wields a power second only to that of Pharaoh. So utterly has he rejected his former life, that he has never attempted to contact his family, even after the famine begins and he knows that they are in peril. He has named his firstborn Menashe, based on the root נשח (to forget). "God has caused me to forget all my toil and all my father's house." (Genesis 41:51) When his brothers arrive in search of food to buy, he takes extraordinary pleasure in tormenting them. And he exacerbates their discomfort by insisting on seeing Benjamin, his only full brother. Benjamin's arrival releases a flood of emotions that Joseph can no longer keep at bay. Then, due to Judah's intervention, the cruel ruse he designs to keep Benjamin in Egypt ends up destroying the last of his defenses. While Joseph has risen to great heights, Judah, shunned by his brothers and chastened by the loss of his two oldest sons and his dealings with Tamar, has finally overcome his resentment and guilt, and begun the process of repentance. And he has much to account for, since he was not only responsible for selling Joseph, but also for duping Jakob with his bloody coat. Now, to protect his father from further sorrow, he is ready to offer himself in place of Benjamin. "And Judah approached him and said, 'please let your servant speak something into my lord's ears, and do not let your wrath be kindled against your servant, for you are like Pharaoh.'" Judah's impassioned speech has inspired numerous stories that embellish his encounter with Joseph. Midrash Tanchuma Vayigash sees them locked in verbal battle for Benjamin, and ultimately for control of the family. "He [Judah] said to him, 'From the very outset you practiced subterfuge toward us ...' Joseph retorted, 'Why do you speak on behalf of all your brothers? I have discovered through this cup that you do have older brothers, and that you are, indeed, a loquacious creature.' Judah replied, 'What you see is correct, but I am compelled to speak because I pledged myself as a surety for my brother.' 'Then why were you not surety for your brother when you sold him to the Midianites for 20 pieces of silver, and why did you distress your father by telling him that Joseph is undoubtedly torn to pieces? ...' ... When Judah heard this he cried out bitterly ... Whereupon Joseph said, 'Come, let us consider the matter between us. Tell me what you think and present your arguments.'" Judah then conspires with his brothers to destroy Egypt, but they eventually dissuade him: "Egypt is not Shechem. If you were able to devastate Egypt, you would destroy the entire world." Joseph is thrown into turmoil, "I would rather die than shame my brothers before the Egyptians." Then, another sage sees them railing against each other with bitter threats and accusations: "'You knew from the very beginning that you brought false charges against us. ... I swear by the life of my righteous father, and you may swear by the life of the wicked Pharaoh, that if I should draw my sword from its sheath, I will fill Egypt with corpses.' 'Draw your sword from its sheath,' Joseph retorted, 'and I will wrap it around your neck.'" Joseph continues to bring up unsavory elements of his brothers' past until Judah and his brothers are finally ready to go into battle against him. Unwilling to let it escalate any further, Joseph prepares the grand denouement: "And he said to them, 'You said, did you not, that this one's brother is dead? In fact, I have purchased him. I will summon him and he will come to you.' He began to call out, 'Joseph, son of Jakob, come to me ... and speak to your brothers who sold you.' They stared into every corner of the room, until Joseph said to them, 'Why do you look all around you? I am your brother Joseph.' They all fainted at once, unable to reply. ... When at last they recognized him, they sought to kill him. An angel descended and scattered them to the four corners of the room. ... [Here, the midrash imagines all kinds of bizarre phenomena unleashed by Judah's powerful roar.] When Joseph saw that they were extremely embarrassed, he said to them, 'Come near to me.' ..." Healing has begun, but will see next week that they are still far from achieving true peace and unity. Centuries later, when the Israelites settle Canaan, the tribe of Ephraim, Joseph's second son, fights with the tribe of Judah for supremacy, eventually splitting into two parts, with Judah, Benjamin, and part of Levi forming the kingdom of Judah, and the rest forming the much larger kingdom of Israel, each with their own places of worship, and both sadly lacking leaders able to reunite them. In our Haftarah, Ezekiel has a vision in Babylon, more than a century after Israel is conquered by the Assyrians and the ten tribes have disappeared. HaShem commands him, "Take one stick and write upon it, 'For Judah and for the children of Israel, his companions,' and take one stick and write, 'For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim and all the house of Israel, his companions.' And bring them close, one to the other into one stick, and they shall be one in your hand." (Ezekiel 37:16-17) Sadly, this promise of eventual unity remains elusive. Our people are still woefully far from unity, enmeshed in inner-Jewish tensions leading to ever-widening chasms that mirror the divisions and hostilities that plague the entire world. Will we ever learn, so that we can finally reach our true potential? Ezekiel's vision gives us hope, but we have much work to do.

Shabbat shalom!