

When the head of a family dies, even the healthiest families can be thrown into chaos despite all precautions taken to ensure peaceful transition. Past resentments and future aspirations can lead to irreparable rifts that often reverberate for generations far beyond the family. The rise and fall of great empires and dynasties offer abundant evidence. The Book of Genesis, which ends with our parashah, is a textbook study of human frailty and family dynamics. Our founding fathers and mothers are anything but perfect. Their actions are often ethically questionable at best and horrifically shocking at worst. Driven by sibling rivalry, jealousy, and ambition; they lie and cheat, they engage in acts of terrible violence, and they persist in egregious parental favoritism. In short, they exhibit all the human foibles that still plague us. And that is why we can learn so much from their stories. Amidst all this dysfunction the profound transformation of Joseph and Judah shows us what can happen when we confront, and then resolve to overcome our weaknesses. While many people become mired in their suffering, blaming others for their misfortune and lashing out in retribution, Joseph and Judah chose another path, earning the right to assume their respective leadership roles. Joseph's trajectory from arrogant, naïve favorite son to viceroy of Egypt is grounded in his acknowledgement of HaShem's role in his life. Judah had to be expelled by his brothers and humbled by his wise daughter-in-law Tamar in order to realize his full potential and receive the blessing that kings, and eventually the Messiah, would descend from him. Indeed, except for the inglorious reign of the Hasmonean dynasty, the Israelite kings were from the Davidic dynasty, i.e., Judah's progeny through Tamar. It is noteworthy that Saul, the very first Israelite king, was a Benjamite. Facing attack from the Philistines, the tribal leaders begged Samuel, the last of the Judges, to appoint "a king to govern us like all other nations." (I Samuel 8:5) According to the Ramban (Nachmanides), Samuel knew "that the request for royalty at that time was distasteful to the Holy One of Blessing. He did not wish to appoint a king over them from the tribe to whom royalty belonged and from whom it was never to depart. He therefore granted temporary royalty." And as we know, David, from the line of Judah, became Saul's successor. Jakob's words when he blesses Judah are both enigmatic and prophetic: "... your brothers will acknowledge you. Your hand will be at the nape of your enemies, your father's sons will prostrate themselves to you. A cub, a grown lion is Judah. From the prey, my son, you withdrew. He crouched, rested like a lion, and like a lion, who will rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the student of the law from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him will be a gathering of peoples." (49:8-10) The incident with Tamar banished his arrogance, enabling him to admit his wrongdoing and assume leadership of his family at this crucial juncture in their lives. Just as Joseph's dreams of the family bowing down to him could only materialize after hardship had opened him to the source of his prodigious talents, so would Judah need to endure ostracism, tragedy, and the near murder of his innocent daughter-in-law in order to become worthy of the kingship. He has both the energy of a cub to withstand enemy attack, and the patience and wisdom of an adult lion to "withdraw from the prey" (the initial plan to kill Joseph, and the charge of adultery that would have condemned Tamar to death). The Ramban teaches that "the scepter will not depart from Judah" means that none of Judah's brothers will rule over him, likely referring to the Hasmonaeans, who were of priestly descent and therefore ineligible to assume the kingship. He continues, "The same meaning applies to the expression, 'there shall not depart a lawgiver from between his feet,' which means that every lawgiver in Israel who carries the king's signet shall be from Judah. It is he who will rule and command in all Israel, and he will have the seal of royalty until the coming of his son, who [will have] the obedience of all people, to do with all as he pleases, this being a reference to the Messiah." Opinions vary on why the eventual Messiah is called Shiloh. Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin 98b postulates that Shiloh is simply the Messiah's name. Saadiah Gaon thinks it is a poetic form of the Hebrew word *shelo* – that which is his, i.e. the kingship. Rashi considers it to mean *shai* (gifts)-*lo* (to him). And Seforno suggests that it is a compound of *she'ol* (deep, bottom) and *shalom*, meaning that the Messiah will bring bottomless, endless peace. However, some also conjecture that Shiloh refers to the city where the mother of Samuel, who would later anoint David, went to pray for a child. Indeed, the *mishkan* resided in Shiloh during the time of Samuel. It was captured by the Philistines and Shiloh was eventually destroyed. In other words, Jakob foresaw that the kingship would not begin until Saul was deposed and the seat of worship was no longer in Shiloh. Whatever it means, and however in all our diversity we choose to view both the kingship and the Messiah, a new, hopeful era begins with Joseph and Judah. Their profound transformation ends familial strife and paves the way for the cohesion they will need to withstand the coming vicissitudes. Of course we will never achieve lasting, perfect harmony – we are humans, after all. But Joseph and Judah, the first to engage in *teshuvah* (repentance), model the ideal to which we all should aspire.

Shabbat shalom!