

The Book of Genesis, which ends with our parashah, features people like you and me. They are capable of rising to great human heights as well as plunging to the deepest depths of human depravity. Their missteps encompass every infraction listed in our Yom Kippur confessional, yet their good qualities are the foundation of our existence. Their intrinsic humanness makes deifying them illogical, setting an inviolable boundary between Creator and Creation. That is what makes us unique and gives us our enduring strength to continue striving to reach our own human potential. When we ate from that fateful tree and acquired the knowledge of good and evil, we also acquired the gift of *teshuvah*, the ability to discern right from wrong, to honestly evaluate our actions, to make amends, and to chart a new, better course. When Jakob on his deathbed blesses his sons, the many facets of our human dichotomy are on full display. Jakob himself is a study in dichotomy. He blesses his sons both as *Jakob* the clever trickster who himself was deceived, and as *Israel* the God-Wrestler and carrier of HaShem's promise to Abraham. As *Jakob* he is brutally honest, as people at the end of their lives often are, plainly expressing his bitterness and disappointment as he reviews their lives and how they impacted his own life. As *Israel* he taps into his *neshamah*, the Divine Spark that is our innermost essence, and envisions the future of their tribes. He understands that the eldest three are unfit for leadership. Reuben, his firstborn, has been too impulsive, and Simeon and Levi, the only sons he calls together, could not control their lethal anger. Midrash Tanchuma Vayechi 9 accuses them of acting like brothers toward Dinah at Shechem, but not toward Joseph, whom they sold. It identifies the weapons of violence that Jakob accuses them of stealing (49:5) as belonging to Esau. It is noteworthy that Jakob curses only their rage (49:7), but to ensure that they will never again be able to join forces in violence, he vows to separate and scatter them among Israel. Levi will be removed from the 12 tribes to serve in the temple, and according to Rashi, all paupers, scribes, and teachers of small children will descend from Simeon. Zebulun will become a prosperous seafaring trader, while Issachar (born before him – another instance of reversed birth order) will remain on land, working for others. That is why in some circles Jewish philanthropists are called Zebulun and scholars are called Issachars. Dan, the stealthy fighter, will judge all of his people. Rashi understands the play on words *dan yadin* (49:16) as *Dan will avenge*, as did his descendant Samson, the last of the Judges, who leads a bitter, lonely life as a guerrilla fighter against the Philistines. After him, the Danites become idolatrous and the entire people descends into chaos. Israel's parting words to Dan are visionary: "I hope for Your salvation, Adonai." Gad's descendants will choose to live on the other side of the Jordan but will help the tribes conquer the land. Asher (*Happy*) will prosper on fertile land that yields delicacies for kings. Swift Naftali will utter beautiful words (interpreted as thanks and praise for the fast-ripening fruits growing on his land). Benjamin will devour his plunder and divide the rest. His was the tribe that conquered Moab, Edom, and the Philistines, and from whom will come King Saul, and later Mordechai and Esther. Judah and Joseph receive the longest and most detailed blessings. Judah, the fourth to be blessed as befits his birth order, receives a blessing full of allegorical references. Jakob calls him a lion cub, an adult lion, a crouching lion, and a lioness. As a cub, he treated Joseph as prey, lying to his father that Joseph had been torn to pieces by a wild animal. But his experience with Tamar moved him to take adult responsibility for his actions, which, according to Midrash Tanchuma, worked for good in the future. Saving Tamar from execution, he saved four lives: Tamar, her two sons, and himself. "The Holy One of Blessing said, 'You saved four lives from fire and death ... Therefore I will rescue four of your descendants, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah from the furnace and the lion's den.'" Overcoming his resentments and guilt feelings, Judah acquired the measured, nuanced temperament of a true leader. His descendants will be kings and lawgivers "until Shiloh (the Messiah) comes" (49:10). Tying his donkey to a vine, washing his clothes in wine and his cloak in the blood of grapes (49:11); and eyes flushed from wine and teeth white from milk (49:12) all point to Israel's future. Jakob reserves the longest and most emotional blessing for Joseph, beginning with a review of his life that includes references to his extraordinary beauty, his ill treatment at the hands of his brothers, his meteoric rise to power in Egypt, and the blessings HaShem has bestowed upon him and will continue to bestow on his progeny. Jakob ends by acknowledging that HaShem has blessed him far more generously than any of his forbears: "to the farthest bounds of the world's hills," and wishes these blessings to "rest upon the head of Joseph, upon the head of the one who was separated from his brothers" (29:26). It is obvious that he still favors Joseph. Unlike Judah, he is still mired in old, destructive patterns. Midrash Tanchuma points out that these engrained traits will continue to surface: Rebellious Korach descends from Levi (Numbers 16), and Zimri, who flagrantly misbehaves with a Midianite woman, is a Simeonite (Numbers 25). *Israel* and *Judah* – two names for a still fractured people. As *Am Israel* we struggle with HaShem and with other humans. But as *Jehudi*, derived from Judah, the first *baal teshuvah*, we carry the hope that one day our good instinct will override our evil instinct, and finally unite us to fulfill the potential of our wonderful diversity.

Shabbat shalom!