

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.” (44:24) The root **אָרַג** 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 brother 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. And then, when Joseph insists on their bringing Benjamin to him, Reuben lashes out, blaming his brothers for not having listened to him, although they had indeed heeded his advice. In the tragic debacle at Schechem, Simeon and Levi had 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 what it feels like to be imprisoned. Judah, the 4<sup>th</sup> brother, turns out to be the one who grows the most. It was he who suggested selling Joseph as a slave rather than leaving him in the pit, albeit with chillingly mercenary words: “What will we gain if we kill our brother ...?” (37:26-27) But at the beginning of our parashah, he is the brother who eloquently offers himself in place of Benjamin. To explain his profound change, Midrash Tanchuma Vayigash 9 offers an embellishment to the story of his encounter with Tamar, which interrupts the Joseph narrative right after the brothers have presented his bloodstained coat to their father. “Jakob our patriarch sent Judah before him because he believed that Judah had killed Joseph at the time he brought him the coat of many colors ...” For his insensitivity, 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 loses two of his three sons and the incident with his daughter-in-law Tamar is deeply humiliating. Understanding what he has done to Joseph gives him the strength and courage to repent and offer himself as a slave in place of Benjamin. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l sees Judah as the Torah’s first *baal teshuvah*, and reminds us that the verb from which his name derives not only means to thank, it also means to acknowledge. Indeed, Judah can finally feel empathy for his father and overcome his resentments against his brothers. Now, he is ready to lead the family, and to become the ancestor of kings. And Joseph, the spoiled, vain youth has matured to become *ha-tzaddik* (the righteous one). Their profound transformation has broken the destructive pattern of sibling rivalry and paved the way for new, healthier relationships. Unfortunately, too few people choose to follow their example. Our troubled world desperately needs more Josephs and Judahs to counteract the hordes of impulsive, egoistic Reubens and Simeons. It’s easy to hold on to resentments and blame others for our shortcomings, and far more difficult to acknowledge our mistakes and make amends. Joseph and Judah, unlikely candidates as they were, rose to the occasion. Now, it’s up to us to lead the way toward *tikun olam* – healing the world.

Shabbat shalom!