

## **Vayeshev 5778**

### **The Hero Of The Story**

A question for us, as we begin one of the greatest narratives in the whole of the Hebrew Bible:

*What's the difference between a protagonist and a hero?*

The Joseph story itself, told over the course of today's parashah and the two that follow, provides an interesting – and not necessarily obvious – answer to this question. The definition of 'protagonist' – it comes from a Greek word – means "player of the first part, chief actor," and the obvious protagonist of the Joseph narrative is Joseph himself. We follow his ups and downs – literal and figurative – and keep an eye on him right until his own death, the last event in the book of Bereishit.

But I suggest that he's not the hero of the story.

A hero, in contrast to a protagonist, is a person who idealized for being courageous, or noble, or outstanding in some other way. And I suggest that honor goes to Judah, Yehudah, the brother for whom we are named *Yehudim*, from whom we trace our own lineage and who is not only our ancestor but the ancestor of the Messiah.

The Yehudah narrative weaves in and out of the Joseph story. It breaks down into three episodes. The first is when Yehudah suggests selling Joseph rather than leaving him to die in the pit; the second is the one we read this morning; and the third is when Yehudah steps up before Joseph to plead for his brother Benjamin's life in one of the most eloquent speeches ever delivered, in the Bible or outside of it.

In the first episode it's quite hard to distinguish Yehudah from the general resentful mass of his brothers. It's true that he is the one who comes up with the suggestion to sell Joseph. But he's also the one who agreed to let him die in the first place – it is Reuben, not Yehudah, who says 'Let us not take his life.' And as the note in the Etz Hayyim says, the tradition gives him no credit – *Whoever praises Judah blasphemes*, they observe, tartly, since he was clearly (to them) only doing it for the money.

How does such unpromising material develop into the genuinely heroic status of the man who pleads for Benjamin's life? The answer has to lie in the middle of the story, in the narrative we read today, in which Yehudah is himself the protagonist.

The Yehudah we meet in that narrative hardly starts out as a hero. He marries one of the 'daughters of the land,' - just like his father and grandfather and great-grandfather didn't want the children to do - and he sires three sons, two of whom are 'displeasing to the Lord' in various ways. So he doesn't seem to be the best of parents; and withholding his third son from Tamar, while understandable, is breaking the law. His subsequent behavior with Tamar – who he genuinely takes for a prostitute – is hardly commendable, though we should note that he does try to find the woman he met and pay her; and he is entirely ready to burn Tamar for adultery in a declaration that seems to indicate that he's prepared to follow the law but only when it works for him!

And yet, Yehudah saves himself, and this is how.

*37:25: As she was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law, "I am with child by the man to whom these belong." And she added, "Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?" Yehudah recognized them and said, "She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he was not intimate with her again.*

In this short passage we have the process that turns Yehudah from a protagonist into a hero.

It begins with *Vayaker Yehudah* – translated as ‘Yehudah recognized them,’ but there is more to this verb and this process. Sometimes in Hebrew you get a word that means both itself and its opposite. *Nkr* means both to be foreign and to be known. The Torah is saying that Yehudah is undergoing the critical process of empathy – of learning to understand the situation not from his own point of view but from Tamar’s. The text makes this clear with ‘inasmuch as...’ in which he once again places himself in her position.

The next step is his affirmation, *Tzadkah mimeni* – ‘she is more in the right than I.’ Previously never in doubt about his decisions or his behavior, Yehudah’s admission is humble and complete, and represents a 180 degree change of behavior. We know from our own daily interactions how difficult it is to say, ‘I was wrong.’ It takes a hero to admit this.

And the final step in the process is, *he was not intimate with her again*. The acknowledgements, great though they are, are not enough. The Torah is pointing out that Yehudah will not go back to where he started out; that his path has changed for good. We are probably familiar with this idea as it relates to the concept of *teshuvah*, which cannot be complete without an undertaking never to behave in the same way again.

How does this story speak to us today? A colleague of mine, Dr Jennifer Thompson, wrote this week about how the various firings and resignations of powerful men that have taken place over the past weeks as the result of sexual impropriety have lacked precisely the elements that Yehudah manifests – acknowledgement, empathy, unambiguous admission and changed behavior. As Yehudim, descendants of Yehudah, we owe it to the culture in which we live to call out the lack of these qualities; but also – and it’s much more difficult – to embody them ourselves.

Yehudah steps out of the shadows this week, ready to take center stage as the true hero of the Joseph narrative. He is outstanding precisely because he recognizes his own limitations; and in doing so, he exceeds them. Can we, as his family, do the same?

Shabbat shalom.