

Mikketz 5781

The Paradox of Benjamin

This week's parashah ends with Joseph falsely accusing Benjamin of stealing a silver cup that Joseph himself has planted in Benjamin's sack. We're familiar with the scene, from what we learned at Hebrew school, or watching it in Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, maybe.

As we think about that scene again this morning, let's focus on how we see Benjamin. Let's pull him up in our imaginations for a moment. Is he tall or is he short? Is he dark or is he fair? Does he look like Joseph at all? Often, the way we see a Biblical character at a specific moment is the way we think of them always, and this is probably that moment for Benjamin.

But little boys grow up. This one is going to grow up to be the leader of a tribe, with a legacy that will follow him out of the Torah, into the books of Joshua and Judges and beyond.

This morning I want to take a look at the whole arc of Benjamin's story.

We should start at the beginning, with his birth. Unlike many other characters, we know something about his birth beyond the fact that his mother gave birth to him. Benjamin was Rachel's second child. She had to wait and wait for Joseph, her first, and in naming him made it clear that the only thing she wanted was another child (is this why Joseph and his father became so close? That's for another sermon). We know this because of Joseph's name - *yosef* - give me another.

Rachel gets her wish and becomes pregnant with the baby who will be Benjamin, but it is a cruel victory for her. She manages to give birth and gasps out his name - *ben-oni*, the son of my agony - before she dies, worn out by her effort to bring him into the world. Jacob immediately re-names him *ben-yamin*, the son of my right hand or my strength.

So right from the start, there are two aspects to Benjamin. One is vulnerability, pain, struggle. The other is power. Which is the real Benjamin?

The contradictions continue through Benjamin's life. Bowing to Joseph, he is entirely at Joseph's mercy, completely vulnerable. But at the end of his own life, Jacob will bless Benjamin with completely different imagery:

*Benjamin is a ravenous wolf
In the morning he consumes the foe
And in the evening he divides the spoil¹*

Once again, his father seems to want Benjamin to be about power and not about love.

We can follow Benjamin's family through the book of Numbers. It resides with the tribes of Ephraim and Menashe in the camp - all of Rachel's family are close, it seems. The tribe counts 35,400 able bodied men of war in the first census² and 45,600 in the second³ - an impressive growth over 40 years, and once again suggesting power. But we ratchet back again to gentleness in Moses' blessing of the tribe at the end of the Torah:

*Beloved of the Lord
the Lord rests securely by him
ever does He protect him
As he rests between His shoulders⁴*

While it's unclear who is resting between whose shoulders - the image works well both ways - this is an image of love, safety and protection - not a single suggestion of war or ferocity anywhere.

¹ Bereishit 49:26

² Bamidbar 1:37

³ Bamidbar 26:41

⁴ Devarim 33:12

The oppositions continue through the books of Joshua and Judges. The tribe of Benjamin was squeezed somewhere between Joseph to the north and Judah to the south. It's a tribe that seems to have been good at fighting - its archers and slingers were especially skilled. The tribe fought loyally with Deborah and Barak in the early part of the book of Judges but falls badly into disrepute at the end of the book (another one of those stories we didn't learn in Hebrew school) and as a result, there's a civil war - literally one part of a single body (politic) set against another.

And in the book of Samuel, the first king of Israel, Saul, is a Benjaminite, and embodies all of the tensions of the tribe in a single character. Saul is so internally divided as to be what today we might call bipolar - on the one hand, tall, aggressive, the model of a military leader, and on the other, fearful, unpredictable and very, very emotional. In the end it's his internal battles that vanquish him, rather than his military ones, and in due course he is replaced by David.

And after that the tribe of Benjamin seems to vanish. Historians think that it was subsumed into the tribe of Judah.

Of course, if that's the case, then we can honestly say that as Jews - named for Judah - we each have a little bit of Benjamin inside us. What can he teach us this week, this month, this year?

There is a clue in his name. Even though Benjamin is named *binyamin* for the right hand, all of those archers and slingers from later in the story are *left-handed*. There's even a left-handed Benjaminite hero - his name is Ehud. So maybe we should think of Benjamin as being ambidextrous. Maybe all that strength is exactly balanced by all that vulnerability.

To be able to function equally well with either hand suggests the ultimate in adaptability - and that's what I think we can draw from Benjamin's story. This is a time in which we are constantly steering between extremes. Can we stop and ask ourselves whether strength or softness best serves the situation we are facing? Will we be fierce or will we be tender? The paradox of right/left handed Benjamin teaches us that we can work equally well with either.

Let me close with a phrase that has passed into our tradition which seems to embody this paradox. We find it both in the Song at the Sea - one of the fiercest places in Tanakh - and in the Hallel, one of the most open and joyous.

The phrase is *ozi vezimrat Yah/vayehi li li'shua*
The Holy One is my strength and my song, and will be my deliverance.

Strength and song. There's Benjamin again. What aspect of him can we call on in this moment? We do have a choice.

Shabbat shalom.