

VAYIGASH (GENESIS 44:18-47:27)

What is a Jew?

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

Yehudi – Jew. It is a word that appears relatively late in the Bible. The Torah usually calls us *Yisrael* – Israel, or *Ivrim* – Hebrews. The term *Yehudi* appears mostly in the Books of Esther and Nehemiah. (Also, occasionally in Zechariah, Jeremiah and Kings.)

One reason we are now called *Yehudim (*plural of *Yehudi*) is that most people who identify as part of our Nation are descendants of the Tribe of Judah. When the ten tribes in the northern Kingdom of Israel were led away to captivity, the remainder of our People were inhabitants of the southern Kingdom of Judea. Most of the residents of that kingdom who were not Priests or Levites were either from the Tribe of Judah or Benjamin.

But there is more. Judah was a role model.

Last week we read that “*Tzofnas Paneach*,” the Egyptian viceroy (Joseph in disguise) insisted that he would not sell food to Jacob’s sons until they brought Benjamin to Egypt. (See “Holy Gangsters”.) Jacob refused to send him. He was afraid something terrible would happen, and he would lose Benjamin, just as he had lost Joseph. He wouldn’t budge. Not until Judah stepped in:

“I will accept responsibility for him. You may demand him from me. If I don’t bring him back to you . . . I will have sinned against you forever.” (Genesis, 43:9)

Rashi explains that Judah was willing to put his share in the Next World on the line. If he would not succeed in bringing Benjamin home from Egypt, he would forfeit his eternal reward. Forever is a very long time.

In this week’s Torah reading, Benjamin’s freedom is in jeopardy. He has been accused of stealing, and therefore threatened with slavery in Egypt, exactly what Jacob was afraid of.

Again, Judah stepped in. He pleaded, he cajoled, and he threatened all of Egypt. He would not take no for an answer. He had promised that he would get Benjamin home, and, one way or another, he was prepared to do it. He even offered himself as a replacement slave instead of Benjamin.

Judah refused to back away from his commitment to his father. He would do whatever was necessary to keep his word.

Not everything in Judah's life was a source of pride.

Several years earlier, Judah committed an embarrassing indiscretion. He had impregnated a woman whom he THOUGHT was a stranger. In reality, she was Tamar, his daughter-in-law. Due to a veil over her face, he thought she was ... well ... engaged in "the world's oldest profession."

The reason Tamar did this was as a means of tricking him into fulfilling the Mitzvah of marrying the widow of a childless relative. She wanted the offspring of this union to be considered as the child of her deceased husband. (See Deuteronomy, 25:5-10 and Genesis, 38:8-11 and 14.)

[The Commentaries go into deep discussions as to why G-d determined that Judah's offspring, who eventually included David and the other kings of Israel and the Messiah, should be conceived in such an ignominious fashion. See "The Paternity Suit".]

Judah's pregnant daughter-in-law refused to identify the father of her expected twins. When subtly confronted with evidence, Judah publicly proclaimed, "*She is more righteous than I!*" (Ibid, 38:26)

How embarrassing! How degrading! Yet, Judah was wrong, and he knew it. He admitted it.

The name *Yehudah*** has within it the word *modeh** – to admit.*

After Judah admitted his mistake, his brother Reuben learned from his example, and admitted a mistake of his own. (See "The Inferior Decorator, or, Stay Out Of My Bedroom!")

Judah wasn't perfect. He was, however, a giant of character. He taught the rest of us how to live our lives.

What is a *Yehudi* -- a Jew?

I have three answers. A *Yehudi* is a person who:

- 1) Stands by his principles with no room for compromise when he is right.
- 2) Admits when he is wrong.
- 3) Prays for the wisdom to know the difference.

Have a great Shabbos.

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