

Vayeishev Coming Out From Hiding וישב

In the middle of this week's Torah portion, after Joseph is thrown into the pit and taken down to Egypt, we have the interruption of chapter 38 of the book of Genesis. In the midst of this drama of a son who has been sent into exile into a deep dark place, the Torah invites us to think about another son named Yehuda. Of course, we've been noticing Yehuda already in chapter 37, because Yehuda was the one whose idea it was to throw him in the pit to begin with, and, or to sell him to the Mitzrim, Reuven wanted to throw him into the pit, but Judah was the first one to say, listen, don't kill him. Judah had already stood up as a voice of reason, a voice of cooler heads prevailing. The spotlight on Judah as a leader had already been cast. And then, out of nowhere, chapter 38 comes along.

Chapter 38, which begins, Vayered Yehuda me'es echav, and Judah went down from his brothers. He descended from his brothers. He separated from them. And at face value, at least on the first cursory reading, you might be wondering, no, what's going on here? Is this, we interrupt this Joseph narrative to bring you the Judah story. What's the connection, at least on a superficial level? But it's very clear, it's very obvious with a close reading, that the Judah story is absolutely fundamental to understanding the entire narrative of the book of Genesis. Without the Judah story, and what takes place between him and his daughter-in-law Tamar, there can be no redemption, there can be no leadership, there can be no good ending, so to speak. One must understand Judah if one is to understand Genesis at all.

So the first moment is, and Judah went down. The reader is invited to think immediately that Judah is identifying with his younger brother, Joseph. Joseph has also gone down a number of verses before. Joseph has gone down involuntarily, thrust into exile, and Judah takes upon himself a voluntary exile of sorts. Judah immediately identifies with the suffering of his brother, and says in a classic formulation of sorts, I too, I need to feel what it is also, what it feels like to go down as well, if I am to be someone who can lead. That's the first moment.

And the second moment of Judah, and I'm sure people already know this story, Judah leaves the brothers, he has three children, he marries someone, he has three children. Two of the children die, and the third child, Sheilah, he refuses to give Sheilah, his third son, to his daughter-in-law, Tamar. In the Levirate practice, he was required to do so. He refused, he was afraid that his third son would also be taken from him, and then Tamar takes the law into her own hands, and she cover

herself, and acts, and makes herself seem as a harlot or a prostitute by the road, and Judah propositions her, and so on. And Judah is then, in order for her to be with him, she says, I won't be with you unless you give me a sign, give me something as collateral, rather, that I can know that you'll pay me. And so Judah gives her three things. And they have relations, and she becomes pregnant. And when Judah is told that his daughter-in-law is pregnant, not knowing, of course, that he was the father, he thinks that she has been, she's acted inappropriately, and so he judges her, Hotzi uviti sareh, he judges her and says she should be killed for having children out of wedlock. And finally, she says to him, before she is about to be put to death, she says, ask my father-in-law to identify these items. The one to whom these items belong is the father of the children. And Judah, of course, we know, Judah says she's right, I was wrong.

Okay. So what's the second moment? Okay, Judah has gone down, he's gone away from his brothers, he's identified with Joseph. And what's the second moment of Judah's great, his triumph? So if we bring our attention to two small words, we have a literary hook on the whole Joseph Jacob narrative. Two words. When Tamar is about to be taken out, she says to the person, bring these three things to my father-in-law and ask him to recognize them. Haker na. Please identify, please recognize these items.

Now, if you have a literary ear, you look, it's a very strange moment. Haker na. So where was the first Haker na? Where was the first Haker na in the whole Jacob Joseph story? When? When Joseph has been taken down and the brothers want to deceive Jacob. They bring him the coat of many colors, that coat. And they say to Jacob, Jacob, you recognize this? Haker na. Do you recognize this coat? The coat that you gave our brother? You recognize this? Haker na, please tell us. Is this that coat? You can't help, if you're reading the text, feeling, really? You hated him so much that this is what you're doing to your father? You see this coat? The one that you made for him? Do you recognize it? And here, Yehuda. He's being brought in such a powerful way, the karma of his actions. He's being brought, it's being brought right back to him. Haker na. Do you recognize this, Judah? Do you recognize how everything comes around? Can you see, can you own? Can you take responsibility? Can you identify how it is that things move from cause to effect and from cause to effect? Can you see how your not taking responsibility has led to all of this? Can you see?

Of course, one also hears in the brothers saying that to Jacob, their own critique of Jacob. Jacob, do you take responsibility for having made this coat? Did you know when you made the

coat that it would have these consequences? And so those two words, everybody, those two words are the two words of all of Genesis. The two words of Haker na. Can you see? Can you identify? Are you willing to look beyond, right? The blame that you assign to others. Are you willing to take ownership? Are you willing to stand up? Are you willing to take responsibility for your life? Those two words, Haker na, is an invitation of the text to Judah. To stand up and not hide. Because after all, everything in the Bible begins with the original hiding.

After Adam and Eve in the myth of the Garden of Eden, have eaten from the tree, they try to hide what they've done. And God comes looking. Haker na. Can you recognize what you've done? And by the end of the Bible, of the end of Brashith, the end of Genesis, 50 chapters later, we are again looking at a Joseph who is hiding behind a mask. And it arrives again saying to Judah, can you, Judah, recognize your brother from behind the mask? Haker na. That word will appear again. One could say that the entire spiritual path is encapsulated in those two simple words. Haker na. Can you see? Can you identify? Do you have the courage to stand in? It isn't a simple practice, the practice of what Judah was asked to do.

To admit when he was placed before him a mistake to say, you're right and I was wrong. Even to this day, watching like news reports last week, a news report was saying that it's a sure thing that if you admit that you made a mistake now as a politician that you'll lose the election. That's what I heard this week. It's a sure thing. We don't want leaders who say that they've made mistakes. That wouldn't be a good thing. It would show vulnerability and weakness. How often I know in my own life when I'm presented with all of the haker nas in my life, how hard it is for me to stand forward and say, you know, you're right. It happens, I think, at least twice a day. And you can ask my staff how well I pass those tests. It's not so good. Judah becomes the exemplar of our people to be a Yehudi, to be a Jew.

We're not called Israelites, we're called Jews, a Yehudi from the tribe of Judah because Judah has within him that capacity for a whole host of reasons that we're not going to go into right now. Where when he's placed, when the rubber meets the road in his spiritual practice and they say to him, Judah, can you recognize, can you see, can you remain awake? Judah says yes. So Judah becomes the great recognizer. That's Judah's role. Judah is the one who comes and knocks on the door of your own hiding and says, come out, come out from wherever you are. Judah is the brother who will invite Joseph to hak yonah, to see that we are contrite.

We've made mistakes. This moment, this crucible requires great courage. In our day-to-day lives, we have every reason to hide.

The heart is a very soft muscle, very tender. It closes very easily and it opens very easily. The real question that we ask ourselves day-to-day is hak yonah. Can you see? Can you recognize?

I want you to bless me as I bless you that we are all given the gift of being real Yehudim, to be a real Yehudi, to be a true Yehudite, to be able to respond when life is asking us to take responsibility, to have the courage to stand underneath, to understand the role our small moments make in the big picture. May God bless us with that in the week of Hanukkah, in the week of being able to look and see with the light of one candle what it is that is happening. May that recognition invite all of us to come out from hiding and let us all say amen.