

Parshat Vayigash Show Up, Speak Up, Stand Up

Rabbanit Adina Fredman

Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track

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How did Judah emerge from all of Jacob's twelve sons to become the leader of all Israel? At first glance, he seems to have none of the qualifications we would expect to see in a leader. He is Jacob's fourth son, not his eldest, nor his favorite. His cruel suggestion to sell his brother Joseph into slavery caused his father unbearable pain. Following this act, Judah separated from his family and went to live with the Cannanites. He fathered two sons with his daughter-in-law whom he mistook for a prostitute. These are not exactly the actions of a leader, especially for the House of Israel.

At the end of last week's parsha, Parshat Miketz, the sons of Jacob return home from Egypt after purchasing food to sustain their family in Canaan during the famine. They do not know that the Viceroy of Egypt is their brother Joseph whom they sold into slavery. Joseph, seeking to test his brothers, has a silver goblet hidden in the sack of the youngest brother, Benjamin. He then sends his officers to arrest the "thief" and to bring him back to Egypt as a slave. When the goblet is found in Benjamin's sack, the brothers tear their clothes in mourning and return to Egypt.

The Torah tell us:

When Judah and his brothers reentered the house of Joseph, who was still there, they threw themselves on the ground before him (Genesis 44:14)

וַיָּבֹא יְהוּדָה וְאָחָיו בֵּיתָה יוֹסֵף וְהוּא עוֹדְנוֹ שָׁם וַיִּפְּלוּ לְפָנָיו אַרְצָה: (בראשית מ"ד:י"ד)

When Joseph demands an explanation, Judah answers for all.

Judah replied, "What can we say to my lord? How can we plead, how can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered the crime of your servants. Here we are, then, slaves of my lord, the rest of us as much as he in whose possession the goblet was found" (Genesis 44:16)

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה מִה־נֹּאמֵר לְאֲדֹנָי מִה־נִּדְבָר וּמִה־נִּצְטַדֵּק הָאֱלֹהִים מִצָּא אֶת־עֹן עַבְדֶּיךָ הִנְנוּ עַבְדִּים לְאֲדֹנָי גַּם־אֲנַחְנוּ גַּם אֲשֶׁר־נִמְצָא הַגְּבִיעַ בְּיָדֵנוּ: (בראשית מ"ד:ט"ז)

Joseph insists that only the thief must remain as a slave and the rest of the brothers are free to return in peace to their father.

Our parsha, Parshat Vayigash, begins with Judah's response.

Then Judah went up to him and said, "Please, my lord, let your servant appeal to my lord, and do not be impatient with your servant, you who are the equal of Pharaoh (Genesis 44:18)

וַיִּגַּשׁ אֵלָיו יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי אֲדֹנָי יְדַבֵּר־נָא עִבְדְּךָ דְבַר בְּאָזְנֵי אֲדֹנָי וְאַל־יִחַר אָפֶךָ בְּעַבְדְּךָ כִּי כְמוֹךָ כְּפָרְעָה: (בראשית מ"ד:י"ח)



Judah steps up to explain the situation and most importantly, to offer to take the place of his younger brother Benjamin as a slave to Joseph. Within a space of five verses, Judah acts three times. Although all of the brothers are in the same dire position, it is Judah who takes the needed steps to address the situation. He comes, he speaks, and he steps forward. He seeks to protect his brother and father from tragedy at the expense of his own freedom.

The subject of leadership is often discussed and debated. We argue about our various political, religious and communal leaders. We express our opinions about their words and actions. In Judah, the Torah gives us a paradigm of leadership; it is the person who shows up, speaks up, and stands up.

We are lucky in our own community to see leadership modeled by Rabbi Avraham (Avi) Weiss, Rabbi in Residence at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, who is well known for his emphasis on the importance of showing up. Whether a shiva, a simcha, or picking up a loved one from the airport, his message is that presence demonstrates concern and responsibility for others.

Recently we suffered the loss of some of our strongest models of leadership. Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks spoke and wrote so eloquently on behalf of the Jewish community on issues of faith, morality and humanity. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's voice on equality and justice will be difficult to replace.

During the past difficult months many people have stepped up to keep our Jewish communities healthy and vibrant. We need to appreciate and express gratitude to the clergy, lay leaders, teachers and medical professionals who have supported us during these difficult times.. Thank you to the school principals standing in the cold and rain to welcome students each day to their changed school environment. Thank you to the clergy who answered questions and solved the unprecedented problems relating to Jewish ritual, liturgy and practice in a pandemic. These incredible individuals have become the leaders we look to by taking the necessary actions to move us forward in difficult times.

At the end of the parsha, Jacob and his family prepare to travel to Egypt to be reunited with Joseph. Jacob sends Judah ahead to prepare the way. Midrash Bereishit Raba teaches that Jacob sent Judah ahead to establish a place of learning, a spiritual home, for the family. Judah demonstrated his leadership ability by stepping up and speaking truth to power. His leadership role is acknowledged by Jacob who recognized that only Judah could create the environment for the family to be able to thrive in a strange new place. Here, in our parsha, the Torah reinforces the idea that leadership is defined as the ability to provide for the physical and spiritual needs of others. Judah teaches us that it is actions that define leadership ability.



Adina Fredman is a member of the Maharat Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track and she teaches Tanach in the Maharat Beit Midrash Program. She also studies in the Maharat Core Semikah Program. Adina taught Jewish studies at SAR Academy for 15 years and studied at Drisha and Nishmat. She has a BA from

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Barnard College in Political Science and a JD from the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law. She is Savta to 9 amazing grandchildren.

