

# A Life Less Ordinary

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## *1. And Judah went down*

The struggle to establish a human self is a lifelong journey. It involves risks and disappointments, and requires one to be serious and mindful of one's actions and of one's relations. An unexamined life may be worth living, but one cannot establish a mature self if one is not able to critically examine the events that make up one's own personal life history. In this journey towards home, honesty as well as courage is required. The struggle to become oneself in the fullest sense demands all one's energy and strength. It is often confusing; relations and past choices make demands and change their masks. Like in a ballet, we are enthralled, caught up in the movement, moving onward, upward, often without clear sight, sometimes together with and sometimes against the forces of the soul. Rashi refers to this as *toldot ve-gilgulim*, the *twists and turns* of fate. And the journey does not end; the drama of battle itself is our home.

The story of Judah the son of Jacob is a story of choices and destiny. Judah makes choices and through his choices changes himself as well as the destiny of the Jewish people. Nothing that he does is achieved lightly. Judah was known as the Lion, the progenitor of kings — but before that he was a brother and a son. We shall look at two key scenes from the life of Judah. The first scene involves the sale of Joseph into slavery, an act in which Judah played a pivotal role. The second scene features the meeting between the brothers and Joseph after Joseph has become viceroy in Pharaoh's Egypt 22 years later. Here, Judah saves his brother Benjamin from imprisonment and prompts the reunion of Joseph and his brothers. In the latter scene we meet a different Judah than in the first; in the intervening years, he seems to have undergone a radical transformation. But what caused Judah to change?

Let us look at scene one. Here are the brothers sitting down to eat bread in Shechem as Joseph is trapped in a nearby pit. They are debating whether to kill him. Reuven does not sit with the brothers but keeps himself

secluded, the commentators suggest he is praying and repenting for the crime the brothers are about to commit (Bereshit 35:26-35):

26 'Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood? 27 Come, let us sell him to the Ish'maelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers heeded him ... 29 When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he rent his clothes 30 and returned to his brothers, and said, "The lad is gone; and I, where shall I go?" 31 Then they took Joseph's robe, and killed a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood; 32 and they sent the long robe with sleeves and brought it to their father, and said, "This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not." 33 And he recognised it, and said, "It is my son's robe; a wild beast has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." 34 Then Jacob rent his garments, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. 35 All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father wept for him.'

26 *Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood? 27 Come, let us sell him to the Ish'maelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh."* By selling Joseph into slavery Judah is only postponing the death of Joseph. His death is almost guaranteed, as the life of a slave is hard and uncertain. Although Judah saves Joseph's life, at least temporarily, it is likely that Judah could

What was the brothers' sin?  
a. Joseph  
b. Jacob  
c. the goat

A Yemenite manuscript mentions the protestations of the goat — it was pregnant (it cries out, 'Let not the ground cover my blood!').

Rabbi Hanina suggests that the wild beast might refer to Potiphar's wife...

have saved Joseph had he wanted to. Judah could have exercised his authority to persuade the brothers. As we see in this *passuk*, he is a skilled leader. He asks rhetorically what they will gain from killing their brother: *What profit is it?* He uses inclusive, metaphorical language: *our brother, our flesh*. The next sentence states: *And his brothers heeded him*. Although Reuven spoke earlier and was the eldest of the brothers, the brothers are not said to have listened to him. But then, together with the other brothers, Judah does the inexcusable: he goes to their father Jacob, and deceives him. *"This we have found; see now (haker-na) whether it is your son's robe or not."* 33 *And he recognised it, and said, "It is my son's robe; a wild beast has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces."* It is interesting to note that the brothers do not tell Jacob that a wild beast killed Joseph. Instead, they insinuate it by the blood-soaked coat, and force Jacob to reach the terrifying conclusion by himself. The Talmud states that the evil beast referred to in this sentence was actually Judah who tore apart the heart of his father Jacob. And Jacob *refused to be comforted*: Why? Rabbi Jose comments, 'It is possible to be comforted for the dead, but not for the living'. A medieval source (Sefer Hasidim, 131) elaborates on the effect the information had on Jacob: 'Know and understand that one who murders or

Whose fault was all this?  
a. Judah who executed the sale.  
b Jacob who loved Joseph more.  
c. The terrifying God of Jewish history.

does evil to another is punished not only for that specific victim but for all who sorrow for him, as it is said: ‘*Now comes the reckoning for his blood*’ (Bereshit 42:22).’ Jacob is inconsolable. The text says that *his father wept for him*. The Talmud comments that this refers to Isaac, the father of Jacob, who mourns for his son.

Scene two offers a strikingly different image of the protagonist (Bereshit 44:12-18). Here is Judah in Egypt. Joseph has tricked the brothers by placing the cup in the mouth of Benjamin’s sack. Joseph wants to imprison Benjamin and let the other brothers go free. As is well known, Benjamin was the second favoured son of Jacob (some fathers never learn) and Judah had to give himself as surety in order to be allowed to bring Benjamin with him down to Egypt:

‘And the cup was found in Benjamin's sack ... 16 And Judah said, "What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants; behold, we are my lord's slaves, both we and he also in whose hand the cup has been found." 17 But Joseph said, "Far be it from me that I should do so! Only the man in whose hand the cup was found shall be my slave; but as for you, go up in peace to your father." 18 Then Judah went up to and said, "O my lord, let your servant, I pray you ...”

*Then Judah went up to him (va-yigash elav yehudah) and said, "O my lord, let your servant, I pray you (bi adoni).* Few lines in Scripture have been subjected to so many different explanations and associated with so much meaning as *va-yigash elav yehudah*. Bereshit Rabba offers eight different interpretations. There is great force in Judah’s move here. He is resolute. He is determined. He *steps up*. As a brother and as a leader, he personally takes responsibility for the fate of Benjamin. The midrash says that when the goblet was found in Benjamin’s sack, the brothers turned their face aside: ‘Who stood up for Benjamin? Judah, and this is the meaning of *va-yigash elav yehudah*.’ Sfat Emet (5637) reads the words, *va-yigash elav*, in the following way: ‘Then Judah went up to himself (*elav*), to his own essence.’ The reason that Judah gives for wanting to replace his brother is closely connected to the guilt he now feels for the deception of his father: ‘*I have seen my father’s anguish at the loss of Joseph — I have heard him describe an absence [‘I have not seen him since’]. My eyes have learned to cross this line of sight, to see that absence too. And if I should see another such absence, I should not be able to bear the sight.*’ In addition to guilt we also sense a stirring of empathy, a care for his old, bereaved father. *Then Judah went up to him (va-yigash elav yehudah) and said, ‘O my lord, let your servant, I pray you (bi adoni)’. Bi adoni here means literally, please my lord,*

*Rabbi Akilas comments that Judah is like a wheel that has no front or back but looks the same from all angles. Judah here presents a self that is identical from all vantage points.*

bi is a shortform of *bevakasha*. But it is possible to read it as *bi* — in me: Take me instead, rather imprison me than the beloved Benjamin.

As Judah rises to the challenge of his life, the midrash quotes Judah as saying, ‘The fire of Shechem burns in my heart.’ Shechem was the place where the brothers sold Joseph, a place of much division (where the kingdom was divided in the days of Rechavam and Yeravam) and tragedy (where Dinah was raped by Shechem the son of Chemor). Bereshit Rabba (93:8) describes the scene in dramatic detail:

‘Then Judah’s towering rage began to show signs of breaking out: his right eye shed tears of blood: the hair above his heart grew so stiff that it pierced and rent the five garments in which he was clothed; and he took brass rods, bit them with his teeth and spat them out as fine powder. Judah raised so loud an outcry that the walls of the city of Egypt tumbled down, the women brought forth untimely births, Joseph and Pharaoh both rolled off their thrones, and Joseph’s three hundred heroes lost their teeth, and as they turned to discover the cause of the tumult, their heads remained forever immobile, facing backward.’

The image is graphic, replete with magic realism. As a consequence, Joseph cannot contain himself any longer. He bursts into tears and declares: ‘*I am Joseph.*’

## 2. And Judah went up

These are two key scenes from Judah’s life. The journey from Shechem to Egypt was not only geographical. Over that distance, Judah undertook a journey from falsehood to integrity. In the following we shall explore how this psychological leap was accomplished.

Shortly after the incident at the pit, the text says that Judah went down from the presence of his brothers (*va-yered yehudah me-et eichav*). The Talmud explains that this means that Judah became degraded or that he chose to step away from his responsibilities as the leader of the brothers. Bereshit Rabba quotes God response to Judah: ‘You have denied, O Judah! You have been false, O Judah!’ And the brothers said to Judah: ‘Are you not our leader?’ So Judah travels from his father in the hills of Hebron and settles in Chaziv. Chaziv is a cognate of *falsehood* or *disappointment*, and this descent into untruth is Judah’s own doing. There, he marries and fathers three sons. The eldest of his sons, Er (meaning either *childless* or *arousal*), is married to a local Palestinian Syrian (Hashemite) girl by the name of Tamar, but he soon dies. According to the custom of the levirate marriage (*yibom*),

*When Judah’s wife Bat-Shua dies, the text says that Judah was comforted, contrary to his father.*

*In modern Hebrew, a ‘nachal achziv’ is a dried-up river, that does not deliver as it were the water it promises.*

by which the surviving brother is married the childless widow, Tamar is given to the second eldest son, Onan (meaning *mourning* or *leaping in dance*). Onan spills his seed so as to not make Tamar pregnant and he soon dies too. Rashi comments that Er too sinned in this way. Onan spilled his seed because they did not want Tamar's beauty to be marred by pregnancy. It is significant that the sin of Onan was principally against his brother. He evaded his responsibility as a brother to ensure that his wife would bear child. Onan's sin is of course greater since the son's of Judah's first born would inherit his status as leader. When Onan spilled his seed, he also spilled the seed of Judah's progeny. It seems that the sin that Judah committed in his youth (against his brother) comes back to haunt him a generation later.

*The pre-occupation with beauty: Is there a way in which the sons of Judah could be said to echo the vanity of Joseph?*

Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law: 'Remain a widow in your father's house, till Shelah my son be grown up'; for he said: 'Lest he also die, like his brethren'. According to the commentators, Tamar dwelt in her father's house for eighteen years. Perhaps Judah had no intention of making good his pledge to Tamar. Perhaps he was afraid that his youngest and now only son would die too. Meanwhile, Tamar suffered as a 'shackled woman', unable to remarry because she was betrothed to Shelah.

The text next describes the extraordinary way in which Tamar takes matters into her own hand (Bereshit 38:12-26):

12 In course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died; and when Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. 13 And when Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," 14 she put off her widow's garments, and put on a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she had not been given to him in marriage.

*In the course of time Judah went up to Timnah.* The Talmud comments that Timnah is actually a low place (Samson *went down* to Timnah). However, for Judah the journey to Timnah was an ascent. *And she sat at the entrance to Enaim:* On the way to Timnah, Judah passes by the entrance to Enaim. The literal meaning of the 'entrance of Einayim — *petach einayim*' is 'the opening of the eyes'. The rabbis, according to Rabbi, searched through the entire Scripture and found no place called *petach einayim*. Therefore they treat it like a metaphor: 'It teaches that she lifted her eyes up to the gate (*petach*) to which all eyes (*einayim*) are directed and prayed. Another interpretation: It teaches that she opened Judah's eyes.

15 When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a harlot, for she had covered her face. 16 He went over to her at the roadside, and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She

said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" <sup>17</sup> He answered, "I will send you a kid from the flock." And she said, "Will you give me a pledge, till you send it?" <sup>18</sup> He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord, and your staff that is in your hand."

'Can't you recognize my humanity?'  
Franz Kafka,  
*Metamorphosis*

The origin of the name Yehudah: 'I will give thanks (le-hodot) — because I [Leah] took more than my share. Now it is incumbent upon me to give thanks' (alt. To acknowledge a debt).  
Rashi on *Bereshit* 29:35.

*When Judah saw her.* Unveiled and dressed as a harlot, sat Tamar at the crossroads. The Talmud is occupied with her face. Although Judah saw her, he did not recognise her. Why? The Talmud says that Judah did not recognise her since he had only seen her veiled. But the text has already stated that she was veiled when dressed up as a harlot too. The double reference to Judah's blindness seems to suggest that although he saw her, he did not recognise her. Judah failed to acknowledge his debt (Rashi comments earlier that this is one of the meanings of Judah's name, to acknowledge debts. Although the text says she was modest, the Gomorrah states that she did not lower her face. When Judah saw her, he paid no attention to her and did not recognise her since she had always been veiled in mourning. Rabbi Jochanan says that at that moment, 'the Angel of Desire appeared before Judah, and said to him: 'Where are you going, Judah! Whence then are kings to arise, whence are redeemers to arise?' And then he turned to her.' And it is at the moment Judah indeed turns to face Tamar, in ways he has scarcely begun to understand.

'The face summons and the face ordains.'  
Emmanuel  
Levinas

Tamar demands *eravon*, a pledge. She asks him to leave her with his signet ring, mantle and staff, later to be redeemed against a payment for sleeping with her. These were his insignia, the symbols of Judah's identity as a leader and a judge; his self is left in pledge. It is significant that Tamar goes to this step. After all, if all she wanted was to fulfil her role as the ancestor of the Messiah, she could have just slept with Judah. But Tamar knew that her task was greater than that. This woman, who is not an Israelite, knew she needed to save not only the royal lineage, but also Judah himself.

So he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him. <sup>19</sup> Then she arose and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood. <sup>20</sup> When Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to receive the pledge from the woman's hand, he could not find her. <sup>21</sup> And he asked the men of the place, "Where is the harlot who was at Enaim by the wayside?" And they said, "No harlot has been here." <sup>22</sup> So he returned to Judah, and said, "I have not found her; and also the men of the place said, 'No harlot has been here.'" <sup>23</sup> And Judah replied, "Let her keep the things as her own, lest we be laughed at; you see, I sent this kid, and you could not find her."

*When Judah sent.* Judah does not return himself to collect his pledge, but sends a servant. Tamar, however, is nowhere to be found. The inhabitants of

Einayim have no recollection of there ever being a harlot at their gates. Judah, for fear of being put to shame, does not inquire further. *Let her keep the things as her own (tikach-la)*. Notice the ease with which Judah gives up the symbols of his identity. The signet ring (*chotemet*) was a sign of royalty, the cords (*ptilim*) were marks of judgeship, and the staff (*mateh*) associated with the Messiah. The signet, cords and staff were to Judah what the coat of many colours was to Joseph, his identity. As the coat was taken away from Joseph, so were the symbols of leadership taken from Judah.

24 About three months later Judah was told, "Tamar your daughter-in-law has played the harlot; and moreover she is with child by harlotry." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned." 25 As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "By the man to whom these belong, I am with child."

*And Judah said, Bring her out, and let her be burned.* This is Judah in his most deprived state of moral indifference. He does not ask his daughter-in-law any questions nor does he attempt to ascertain what happened. Unable to make the connection, numb by years of moral blindness, Judah simply decrees, '*Bring her out, and let her be burned*'. According to tradition, the trial was constructed in the court of Shem and according to aggadah the judge was God Himself. At this point, however, Tamar really shows her greatness:

And she said, "Mark, I pray you, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff." 26 Then Judah acknowledged them and said, "She is more righteous than I."

*Mark, I pray you (haker-na), whose these are.* The echo from Judah's past is unmistakable. Again, someone is forced to identify the crime. Comments the Talmud: 'The Torah laughs of men! The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Judah: You deceived your father with a kid of goats; by your life! Tamar will deceive you with a kid of goats!' And Rabbi Jochanan adds: 'You told you father *haker-na*, now Tamar will tell you the same as long as you live.' The echoing *haker-na* reverberates through his life and the voice is Tamar's (in the words of the midrash, Tamar says to Judah: "Do not hide your eyes from me"). *Then Judah acknowledged them (va-yaker yehudah)*. In a realisation that is at the same time surprising and mature, Judah *recognised* them [himself], and said: '*She is more righteous than I (hi tzadkakh mi-meni)*.' His confession is made in public. The Targum (Yerushalmi Targumim Bereshit 38.25) reports the full speech of Judah:

*Hi tzadkakh mi-meni: Alternative punctuation: She is right. The child is from me.*

*Bereshit 38:25 'As she was being brought out' — note that the Hebrew word for she (hey-yod-alef) has been substituted for the Hebrew word for he (hey-vav-alef): Was it really Judah that was delivered to the court?.*

*Mendel Mocher Sforim suggests the preoccupation with the fate of the goat is the origin for the dairy meal at Shavuot.*

‘Because I took the coat of Joseph, and coloured it with the blood of a kid, and then laid it at the feet of my father, saying: *haker-na*, know now whether it be your son’s coat or not, therefore I must now confess, before the court, to whom the signet, staff and mantle belongs. It is better that I be put to shame in this world than be put to shame in the next world, before the face of my pious father. Now then, I acknowledge that Tamar is innocent. By me she is with child.’

And Talmud Bavli, Masechet Sota 10b:

‘R. Hama b. Hanina said: With the word ‘discern’ [Judah] made the announcement to his father, and with the word ‘discern’ an announcement was made to him. With the word ‘discern’ he made an announcement — ‘Discern now whether it be thy son’s coat or not’ (Bereshit 37:32), and with the word ‘discern’ an announcement was made to him — ‘Discern, I pray thee, whose are these’ (Bereshit 38:25). ‘*Na*’ is nothing but the language of request. She said to him, ‘Please, acknowledge the face of your Creator and do not cast your eyes away from me.’ And Judah said, ‘She is more righteous than I.’

Maybe it was at this point that Judah achieved moral maturity. Through a woman who was able to open his eyes and find himself, Judah learned to acknowledge his responsibility. Because of this, he was chosen to be the leader of the Jewish people. Bereshit Rabba (99:9) states that when Jacob reached the end of his life, he blessed his sons. Each of them received blessings that sounded more like curses and in Rashi’s depiction of this scene there is a moment when Judah tries to evade his father’s attention. Jacob blesses Judah in the following way: ‘From prey [a lion’s whelp], my son, you have risen up’ (Bereshit 49:9). The Midrash deliberately misreads this as, ‘from praying on my son [Joseph], you have risen up.’ According to the midrash, Jacob continues: ‘You acknowledged publicly (*hodeita*) your responsibility in the affair of Tamar — so your brothers will acknowledge you as king (*yodukha*). You have earned your name, *Yehudah*.’ Judah’s name, which contains all the letters of the name of God (whose name is associated with the process of becoming, *ihieh asher ihieh*), is synonymous with his recognition of guilt and of responsibility.

*The public confession of Judah is a model of teshuvah. It has one other parallel in scripture: the confession of King David, the descendant of Tamar.*

From Peretz, the son of Tamar came forth the royal lineage, the prophets Amos and Isaiah, and the Messiah. At the illicit meeting of Yehudah and Tamar at *petach einayim*, the future of Israel was forged. From the life of evasion, Judah managed to conquer himself and rise to the challenges set before him. The struggle to establish a human self results in a person whose self is inseparable from that struggle. In the case of Judah, the obstacle that he needed to overcome was himself.

*Does being Jewish mean to be aware? If so, of what?*  
 a. God  
 b. Israel  
 c. Justice

*Postscript*

*In Bamidbar (31:29), Moses counts the members of the People of Israel. In order to be counted, each person is required to contribute half a shekel (machatzit ha-shekel). The brothers of Joseph received five shekalim for the sale of Joseph to the Ishma'elites. There were twelve brothers. Joseph was in the pit and Reuven was not present. So each brother received a tenth of five shekels, in other words, each one received half a shekel. When Moses counted the members of the people of Israel, they each paid half a shekel. A nation cannot be build if one does not repudiate the sale of a brother into slavery.*