

A Muse: Vayechi

This last portion of Genesis, in particular the blessings of Jacob to his sons (and grandsons) provide us with some insight into Jacob's feelings towards his sons. One question that begs to be asked is why was Judah accorded the leadership of the tribes and subsequently the Jewish people? Judah, who broke away from his brothers, married a Canaanite. It was Judah who played a pivotal role in the sale of Joseph and who confronts Jacob with the death of Joseph. It was Judah who is less than honest with Tamar, abusive towards her later and only when cornered is reconciled with her. This is the Judah, whom Jacob in his blessings references his "love of wine", yet charges him with the leadership of the Jewish people instead of his beloved Joseph.

Joseph is regarded by our rabbis as the righteous one, Yoseph Hatzadik, yet Jacob didn't consider his worthiness to lead the Jewish People. Joseph, who had a stellar career in spite of his tribulations, maintained throughout, unlike Judah, a connection to his tradition. Joseph, after all he had been through reconciles himself to his brothers in spite of their mistrust without conditions and without ulterior motives, yet it is Judah whom Jacob blesses with the leadership mantle. Why?

True to form to the very end Jacob was the patriarch of a dysfunctional family who succeeded in pivoting brother against brother. Joseph, while possessing the skills, talent and moral stuff to be the leader came up short because no matter what, he was the polarizer. Even when he reconciled himself to his brothers they acceded out of ulterior motive; not love and respect but because of the power that Joseph wielded in his position as the vizier. Judah on the other hand had the skill to become the consensus builder among his brothers. While they may have been fractured and argumentative, Judah was able to hold them together with a vision and so the mantle of leadership was passed to him.

One last point: Even at the very end, when Jacob blesses his sons, he set up another point of discord amongst them by including Joseph's son (Ephraim and Manasseh) on parity with the sons of Jacob. In so doing Jacob set up another polarity. Through Judah came the original kingdom which split after Solomon. The ten tribes which split off (Northern Tribes) were referred to as Beit Yoseph or Beit Ephraim (Zechariah 10:6-7) and the Southern Kindom known as Beit Judah or Beit David. Ephraim, the progeny of Joseph laid claim to the Kingdom because they believed it was Joseph who deserved the mantle, him being the favorite of Jacob, and not Judah who was fundamentally flawed.