

Judah's Lesson – It's Never Too Late to Do the Right Thing
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There is a movie, just several years old, that's been running recently on HBO. It's called "Brokedown Palace." The title derives from a song by the Grateful Dead and the story is about two young girls, best friends, who plan an adventure to Hawaii. Along the way they meet an intriguing stranger who encourages them to change their plans and go with him to Thailand. One girl, Alice, who's always been sort of wild ... lying, drinking, skipping school, convinces her more cautious friend, Darlene, to "have an adventure and have some fun."

The young man, a real sleazy sort, has no interest in the girls beyond using them as "mules." He convinces Darlene to hide drugs in her backpack thinking that American girls would be immune from scrutiny. But the heroin- sniffing dogs are on duty that day and the drugs are found. The guy is gone, the girls are in shock and no one believes their story.

They end up in a horrific prison in Thailand, (They call it the "Brokedown Palace"), victims of a justice system that imposes life imprisonment for smuggling drugs. Their families work through the American embassy but to no avail. Finally an American lawyer married to a Thai lawyer, wangles them a 33 year sentence and the hope of a pardon.

But something goes wrong there, too. And as they girls appear, in handcuffs and chains before a grand "sultan" type, their case is dismissed and they are about to be sent back to prison for life. Until Alice, the wild one, literally throws herself on the floor in front of the official on the throne. She pleads for the life of her friend, saying that Darlene had no knowledge of the smuggling plan. But that wasn't true. It was Alice who was the innocent one, but nonetheless, she takes the blame for them both. The official is impressed by Alice's love for her friend and her willingness to serve out both sentences. And in a dramatic climax, Darlene goes free.

Which brings us to Torah and to Judah who, thousands of years earlier, is in the same boat as Alice was. Like Alice, Judah is pleading for his brother's life. As Judah steps forward to face Joseph he realizes that everything now depends on what he says. Our sages tell us that Judah considers every word, carefully calculating his arguments, and even measuring the tone of his voice. Everything is riding on his shoulders because he is the one who is pleading for the life of his brother and his father, too.

Word by word Judah worked to penetrate Joseph's heart and turn his anger into compassion. And Joseph is angry, all right. This is the opportunity he has been waiting for to get back at his brothers for selling him into slavery. Everything depends on Judah saying the right thing.

So what does Judah do first.? The same thing any one of us would do in a similar circumstance. Judah disarms Joseph with flattery. Judah begins:

"May that which I want to say not excite your sensitiveness, for, see, you are like the Pharaoh. I honor you as a Pharaoh."

Smart guy, this Judah. Haven't we done the same thing? We sit down to solve a problem, maybe with our husband or wife or maybe with our kids at a family meeting. We start with something positive. But what really moved Joseph was not Judah's eloquent words or long and deliberate speech. It was something else. Before he concludes, Judah approaches Joseph and says, *"If we go home without Benjamin, our father will surely die. So take me instead. Make me your slave. But let my little brother go."*

For Joseph, and for the bureaucrat who listened to Alice in Brokedown Palace, it wasn't the words that made the difference. The actions said it all.

Judah took a stand. He said, "Take me." And Alice did the same thing. Just like Judah, she also was innocent, but she stood up to the Thai justice system and said, "Take me. Let me serve out my own sentence and my friend's sentence, too. Take me instead."

This is the lesson of Judah's plea. It's about making amends for the wrongs we've done, even if the opportunity comes long after we've done them. Even though Judah wasn't a spy, even though he wasn't guilty NOW, in the past he had participated in the events that led up to Joseph's having been sold into slavery. By offering to take Benjamin's place, he was making amends for his awful behavior in the past.

And Alice did the same thing. Even though she had no knowledge of the drugs in her friend's backpack, she offered to serve both sentences because, in the past, she had been the one who started all the trouble, she had been the one who, many times earlier, had led her friend astray.

For Judah it all ends well. Joseph reveals himself as their brother, they embrace and all is forgiven. For Alice in the movie, in the very last scene we see her waving from behind bars as Darlene goes free and we hope that she'll be released, too. But the point here is that both Alice and Judah made the ultimate offer of self-sacrifice. Both said, "Look, I don't know what will become of me, but because of what I've done in the past, I'm willing to do the right thing now. I'm willing to make up for the wrongs I've done."

It was true then and it is true today. Words are cheap. Even the longest and most flowery speech in all of Genesis comes cheap if we are not willing to back up those words with actions. For it was when Judah offered to exchange himself for Benjamin, that Joseph's heart was moved. And when Alice offered to serve out both prison sentences, it was then that the Thai official's heart softened, as well.

Judah's lesson to all of us is to help us remember the wrongs we've done, even if those wrongs happened long ago. Then, if and when the time should come for us to make amends, we pray for the same willingness to put ourselves on the line, to make the right choice, to do the right thing and to leave the outcome up to G-d.

