Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Vayigash

Judah's Repentance

Last week's portion ended on a cliffhanger, with Joseph demanding that Benjamin remain in Egypt as his slave. This week's portion, Vayigash, picks up with Judah's response to Joseph. He begins by recounting their family's story, explaining why Jacob did not want Benjamin to go down to Egypt. Judah then describes what would happen if Joseph were to take Benjamin prisoner and send the brothers back to Jacob.

בראשית מד:ל–לד	**Genesis 44:30–34**
וְעַתָּה כְּבֹאִי אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ אָבִי וְהַנַּעַר אֵינֶנּוּ אִתָּנוּ וְנַפְשׁוֹ קְשׁוּרָה בְנַפְשׁוֹ: (לא) וְהָיָה כִּרְאוֹתוֹ כִּי־אֵין הַנַּעַר וָמֵת וְהוֹרִידוּ עֲבָדֶיךָ אֶת־שֵׂיבַת עַבְדְּךָ אָבִינוּ בְּיָגוֹן שְׁאֹלָה: (לב) כִּי עַבְדְּךָ עָרַב אֶת־הַנַּעַר מֵעִם אָבִי לֵאמֹר אִם־לֹא אֲבִיאֶנּוּ אֵלֶיךָ וְחָטָאתִי לְאָבִי כָּל־הַיָּמִים: (לג) וְעַתָּה יֵשֶׁב־נָא עַבְדְּךָ תַּחַת הַנַּעַר עֶבֶד לַאדֹנִי וְהַנַּעַר יַעַל עִם־אֶחָיו: (לד) כִּי־אֵיךְ אֶעֱלֶה אֶל־אָבִי וְהַנַּעַר אֵינֶנּוּ אִתִּי פֶּן אֶרְאֶה בָּרָע אֲשֶׁר יִמְצָא אֶת־אָבִי:	"Now, if I come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us—since his own life is so bound up with his— when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will send the white head of your servant our father down to Sheol in grief. Now your servant has pledged himself for the boy to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, I shall stand guilty before my father forever.' Therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord instead of the boy, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father unless the boy is with me? Let me not be witness to the woe that would overtake my father!"

- **What reason does Judah give for why Joseph should not take Benjamin? What other reasons could he have offered, and why do you think he chooses this one?**
- **Judah proposes that Joseph keep him as a slave instead of Benjamin. What might we learn about Judah's character from this offer?**

In a sense, Judah's speech is an act of *teshuva* (repentance) for his role in the sale of Joseph. Whereas earlier he allowed his brother to be sold into slavery, he is now doing

everything in his power to prevent the same thing from happening to Benjamin. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, develops this aspect of the story, presenting Judah as a model of repentance.

***Lessons in Leadership*, Vayigash: "The Unexpected Leader"**
Judah is the first person in the Torah to achieve perfect repentance (*teshuva gemura*), defined by the sages as one who finds himself in a situation to repeat an earlier sin but who does not do so because he is now a changed person. Many years before, Judah was responsible for Joseph being sold as a slave: "Judah said to his brothers, 'What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.' His brothers agreed" (Gen. 37:26–27). Now, faced with the prospect of leaving Benjamin as a slave, he says, "Let me stay as a slave and let my brother go free" (44:33). That is perfect repentance, and it is what allows Joseph to reveal his identity and forgive his brothers.

- **Rabbi Sacks argues that Judah faced a similar situation with Benjamin to the one he had faced with Joseph years earlier. What are the similarities – and can you identify any significant differences between the two episodes?**
- **Using the definition of "perfect repentance" presented in this source, can you think of a time in your life when you had an opportunity to perform this kind of *teshuva* – and did you take it?**

This episode is not the first time Judah has undergone a process of repentance. A couple of chapters earlier, in Vayeshev, Judah was forced to admit that he was the man who had impregnated his former daughter-in-law Tamar, and that she was therefore not guilty of adultery. Although the full story is more complicated, the main point to focus on in relation to Vayigash is Judah's repentance:

בראשית לח:כד–כו	**Genesis 38:24–26**
וַיְהִי ׀ כִּמְשֹׁלֹ֣שׁ חֳדָשִׁ֗ים וַיֻּגַּ֤ד לִֽיהוּדָה֙ לֵאמֹ֔ר זָנְתָ֥ה תָמָ֖ר כַּלָּתֶ֑ךָ וְגַם֙ הִנֵּ֣ה הָרָ֔ה לִזְנוּנִ֔ים וַיֹּ֥אמֶר יְהוּדָ֖ה הוֹצִיאוּ֣הָ וְתִשָּׂרֵֽף׃ (כה) הִ֣וא מוּצֵ֔את וְהִ֣יא שָׁלְחָ֔ה אֶל־חְמִ֖יהָ לֵאמֹ֑ר לְאִישׁ֙ אֲשֶׁר־אֵ֣לֶּה לּ֔וֹ אָנֹכִ֖י הָרָ֑ה וַתֹּ֣אמֶר הַכֶּר־נָ֗א לְמִ֤י הַחֹתֶמֶת֙ וְהַפְּתִילִ֔ים וְהַמַּטֶּ֖ה הָאֵֽלֶּה׃ (כו) וַיַּכֵּ֥ר יְהוּדָ֖ה וַיֹּ֣אמֶר צָדְקָ֣ה מִמֶּ֔נִּי כִּי־עַל־כֵּ֗ן לֹא־נְתַתִּ֛יהָ לְשֵׁלָ֖ה בְּנִ֑י	About three months later, Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has engaged in illicit relations; in fact, she is pregnant from those relations." "Bring her out," said Judah. "She should be burned!" As she was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law: "It's by the man to whom these belong that I'm pregnant." And she added, "Examine

	these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?" Judah recognized them, and said, "She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah."

- **Based on these verses, what exactly is Judah repenting for?**
- **In this source, Judah is forced to admit that he was in the wrong. Can you think of a time in your life when you had to admit to a mistake you could have kept secret? What motivated you to come forward?**

Jumping forward in Jewish history, the tribe of Judah is notable for being the tribe from which Israel's kings descended. *Bereshit Rabbah* – a work of rabbinic commentary composed around 400 CE that provides verse-by-verse interpretations of the book of Genesis – connects Judah's kingship to his repentance in its discussion of Jacob's blessings to his sons.

בראשית רבה צט:ט	**Genesis Rabbah 99:8**
וְהָיָה מִתְיָרֵא יְהוּדָה שֶׁלֹּא יִזְכֹּר לוֹ מַעֲשֶׂה תָּמָר, הִתְחִיל קוֹרֵא לוֹ (בראשית מט, ח): יְהוּדָה אַתָּה יוֹדוּךָ אַחֶיךָ, אָמַר לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא אַתָּה הוֹדֵיתָ בְּמַעֲשֶׂה תָּמָר, יוֹדוּךָ אַחֶיךָ לִהְיוֹת מָלֶךְ עֲלֵיהֶם	**"Judah, you shall your brothers acknowledge; your hand will be at the nape of your enemies; your father's sons will prostrate themselves to you" (Genesis 49:8)**... Judah feared that [Jacob] would mention the incident of Tamar to him. He began calling him: "Judah, you shall your brothers acknowledge [*yodukha*]." The Holy One blessed be He said to him: 'You confessed [*hodeita*] in the incident of Tamar; your brothers will acknowledge you to be king over them.'

- **Why do you think the source begins by noting Judah's fear that his father would bring up Tamar? How does this detail strengthen the argument being made?**
- **According to this source, Judah's act of confession earned him kingship. What might this suggest about the qualities of a good king?**

The Talmud, a record of generations of rabbinic debate about law, philosophy, and biblical interpretation, compiled between the third and eighth centuries, offers another perspective on how Judah was rewarded for his *teshuva*.

טוטה י: "וַיַּכֵּר יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר צָדְקָה מִמֶּנִּי". הֵיְינוּ דְּאָמַר רַב חָנִין בַּר בִּיזְנָא אָמַר רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן חֲסִידָא: יוֹסֵף שֶׁקִּדֵּשׁ שֵׁם שָׁמַיִם בַּסֵּתֶר — זָכָה וְהוֹסִיפוּ לוֹ אוֹת אַחַת מִשְּׁמוֹ שֶׁל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא, דִּכְתִיב: "עֵדוּת בִּיהוֹסֵף שָׂמוֹ" יְהוּדָה שֶׁקִּדֵּשׁ שֵׁם שָׁמַיִם בְּפַרְהֶסְיָא — זָכָה וְנִקְרָא כּוּלּוֹ עַל שְׁמוֹ שֶׁל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא.	**Sotah 10b** "And Judah acknowledged them, and said: She is more righteous than I" (Genesis 38:26). This is [the same] as Rav Hanin bar Bizna [who] says [that] Rabbi Shimon Hasida says: Joseph, who sanctified the name of Heaven in private [by not committing adultery with the wife of Potiphar,] merited that one letter from the name of the Holy One, Blessed be He, was added to his [name,] as it is written: "He appointed it in Joseph [*bihosef*] for a testimony in his name" (Psalms 81:6). [In this verse the name Joseph is written with an additional letter *heh*, found in the ineffable name of God.] Judah, who sanctified the name of Heaven in public, merited that his entire [name] is called by the name of the Holy One, Blessed be He, [for all the letters of the ineffable name of God are included within the name of Judah.]

- **This source suggests that Joseph's refusal to commit adultery was a private sanctification of God's name, while Judah's public admission that Tamar was in the right constituted a public sanctification of God's name. Do you agree with these distinctions? Why or why not?**
- **Can you think of a time when you witnessed someone act with the kind of integrity or courage this source attributes to Judah? How did witnessing their actions affect you?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. We examined two different instances in which Judah engaged in *teshuva*. What similarities and differences do you see between the two stories?
2. In what ways might Judah's interaction with Joseph be seen as building on his earlier experience with Tamar?

3. Although these sources focus primarily on Judah, Jacob also appears several times. Based on these appearances, what can you learn about Jacob's character and his relationships with his sons?
4. After studying these sources, what is one idea that will stick with you, and what is one question you are left with?

Suggestions for Further Study

If you are interested in seeing further sources on Vayigash, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Vayigash page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also find materials on Sefaria's Vayigash topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Judah, Judah and Tamar, and Repentance.

Rabbi Sacks' framework of "complete repentance" is based on a definition given by Maimonides in his *Mishneh Torah*. Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, also known as Maimonides, was perhaps the greatest intellectual and spiritual figure of post-Talmudic Judaism. Among his most notable works is the *Mishneh Torah*, a monumental legal code and one of the most organized, comprehensive, and influential works of Jewish law. Written over a period of ten years, the work systematically categorizes and explains all aspects of Jewish observance. In the second chapter of the laws of repentance, Maimonides discusses what counts as full repentance. He also lays out other guidelines for the practice of *teshuva*.

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