

Most commentaries on this week's parshah focus on Joseph forgiving his brothers. There is that dramatic moment when he sends all his Egyptian staff from the room and reveals himself – I am your brother Joseph.

This moment of reconciliation has even made it into our new High Holy Day machzor as an example of forgiveness within a troubled family. We read it last fall on Yom Kippur morning. But this year what struck me much more was Judah's willingness to go to bat for Benjamin – to give up his own life and freedom. As he says to Joseph, "Let your servant remain a slave to my lord instead of the boy" and as he had promised his father, "I, myself, will be surety for him, you may hold me responsible if I do not bring him back to you and set him before you." Further, he says, "You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my care."

What makes this particularly remarkable to me is that Judah does this even though Jacob seems not to have learned anything about the consequences of his own poor behavior or changed in any way.

At the beginning of the Joseph story, we are told about how Jacob favors Joseph, "the child of his old age" and about how he gives him special gifts, "the ornamented tunic" and allows him to lord his special status over his brothers and does not reprimand him. We have a sense of the pain this causes the brothers, not only in their behavior toward Joseph, but also in the incident with Reuben, after Rachel's death. Reuben takes his father's concubine Bilhah as a wife, Bilhah being the concubine Rachel had provided Jacob to bear children in her name. She is the mother of Dan and Naftali.

While modern Biblical scholars understand this as Reuben's effort to prematurely secure his place as first born as his father's successor, the midrash gives this a psychological twist. I recognize in this action an expression of Reuben's anger for his mother, and solidarity with her pain as Jacob turns, not to Leah, but to Rachel's concubine, after Rachel's death.

We have further evidence that Jacob persists in his favoritism in two other incidents. The first is in his refusing to allow Benjamin to go to Egypt to get rations on the first trip, "since he feared he might meet with disaster," and remains resistant to allowing him to go on the second trip, despite Judah's assurances and despite the wretched state of starvation of the entire family.

Further, on his deathbed, Jacob continues to show special partiality to Joseph and his family, calling for him and giving his children a special blessing which itself is given with favoritism toward the younger son, Ephraim.

Often, when it is time to forgive someone who has offended against us, there is comfort in feeling that they now understand what they did wrong, regret it, and will not repeat it.

But what about the person who has hurt us and persists in that behavior? Can we find a way to act with mercy and compassion, even when they do not grow or learn or change?

Judah's standing up for Benjamin is an example of an individual extricating himself from the wrong he experienced and moving on even without his father having changed. This is further evidence of Judah's own ability to learn and see clearly even through his own pain, as in the incident with Tamar, where he proclaims, "She is more right than I." These are leadership qualities.

Though the Bible calls us B'nai Yisrael, the children of Israel, that is Jacob, for most of our history we have been known as Jews – Yehudim, from Yehud, the name taken after the return from the Babylonian Exile, taken from the name of the southern kingdom Yehudah that remained loyal to David's descendants, taken from the name of the brother who emerges as a hero in the Joseph story, Leah's son Judah.