I was once present when the great historian of Islam, Bernard Lewis, was asked to predict the course of events in the Middle East. He replied, “I’m a historian, so I only make predictions about the past. What is more, I am a retired historian, so even my past is passé.” Predictions are impossible in the affairs of living, breathing human beings because we are free and there is no way of knowing in advance how an individual will react to the great challenges of his or her life.

If one thing has seemed clear throughout the last third of Genesis it is that Joseph will emerge as the archetypal leader. He is the central character of the story, and his dreams and the shifting circumstances of his fate, all point in that direction. Least likely as a candidate for leadership is Judah, the man who proposed selling Joseph as a slave (Gen. 37: 26-27), whom we next see separated from his brothers, living among the Canaanites, intermarried with them, losing two of his sons because of sin and having sexual relations with a woman he takes to be a prostitute. The chapter in which this is described begins with the phrase, “At that time Judah went down from among his brothers” (Gen. 38: 1). The commentators take this to mean moral decline.

Yet history turned out otherwise. Joseph’s descendants, the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, disappeared from the pages of history after the Assyrian conquest in 722 BCE, while it was Judah’s descendants, starting with David, who became kings. The tribe of Judah survived the Babylonian conquest, and it is Judah whose name we bear as a people. We are Yehudim, “Jews.” This week’s parsha explains why.

Already in last week’s parsha we began to see Judah’s leadership qualities. The family had reached deadlock. They desperately needed food, but they knew that the Egyptian viceroy had insisted that they bring their brother Benjamin with them, and...
Jacob refused to let this happen. He had lost one child (Joseph) of his beloved wife Rachel and he was not about to let the other, Benjamin, be taken on a hazardous journey. Reuben, in keeping with his unstable character, made an absurd suggestion: “Kill my two sons if I do not bring Benjamin back safely.” It was Judah who with quiet authority – “I myself will guarantee his safety; you can hold me personally responsible for him” – persuaded Jacob to let Benjamin go with them.

Now in Egypt the nightmare scenario has unfolded. Benjamin has been found with the viceroy’s silver cup in his possession. The official delivers his verdict. Benjamin is to be held as a slave. The other brothers can go free. At this point Judah steps forward and makes a speech that changes history. He speaks eloquently about their father’s grief at the loss of one of Rachel’s sons. If he loses the other he will die of grief. I, says Judah, personally guaranteed his safe return. He concludes:

“Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord’s slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come on my father.” (Gen. 44: 33-34)

No sooner has he said these words than Joseph, overcome with emotion, reveals his identity and the whole elaborate drama reaches closure. What is happening here and how does it have a bearing on leadership?

The sages (Berakhot 34b) articulated a principle: “Where penitents stand even the perfectly righteous cannot stand.” The Talmud brings a prooftext from Isaiah: “Peace, peace, to those far and near” (Is. 57: 19) placing the far (the penitent sinner) before the near (the perfectly righteous). However, almost certainly the real source is here in the story of Joseph and Judah. Joseph is known to tradition as ha-tzaddik, the righteous.1 Judah, as we will see, is a penitent. Joseph became “second to the king.” Judah, however, became the ancestor of kings. Hence, where penitents stand even the perfectly righteous cannot stand.

Judah is the first person in the Torah to achieve perfect repentance (teshuvah gemurah), 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.2 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’s 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)

Judah is the first person in the Torah to achieve perfect repentance (teshuvah gemurah) - one who finds himself in a situation to repeat an earlier sin but who does not do so.

1 See Tanhumah (Buber), Noah, 4, s.v. eleh; on the basis of Amos 2: 6, “They sold the righteous for silver.”
2 Maimonides, Hilkhot Teshuvah, 2: 1.
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.” That is perfect repentance, and it is what allows Joseph to reveal his identity and forgive his brothers.

The Torah had already hinted at the change in Judah’s character. Having accused his daughter-in-law Tamar of becoming pregnant by a forbidden sexual relationship, he is confronted by her with evidence that he himself is the father of the child and immediately admits: “She is more righteous than I” (Gen. 38: 26). This is the first time in the Torah we see a character admit that he is wrong. If Judah was the first penitent, it was Tamar – mother of Perez from whom king David was descended – who was ultimately responsible.

Perhaps Judah’s future was already implicit in his name, for though the verb le-hodot from which it is derived means “to thank” (Leah called her fourth son Judah saying “This time I will thank the L ORD,” Gen. 29: 35), it is also related to the verb le-hitvadot, which means “to admit, to confess,” and confession is, according to Maimonides, the core of the command to repent.

Leaders make mistakes. That is an occupational hazard of the role. Managers follow the rules, but leaders find themselves in situations for which there are no rules. Do you declare a war in which people will die, or do you refrain from doing so at the risk of letting your enemy grow stronger with the result that more will die later? That was the dilemma faced by Chamberlain in 1939, and it was only some time later that it became clear that he was wrong and Churchill right.

But leaders are also human and they make mistakes that have nothing to do with leadership and everything to do with human weakness and temptation. The sexual conduct of John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton was less than perfect. Does this affect our judgment of them as leaders or not? Judaism suggests it should. The prophet Nathan was unsparing of King David when he sinned with another man’s wife.

What matters, suggests the Torah, is that you repent – you recognise and admit your wrong, and you change as a result. As Rav Soloveitchik pointed out, both Saul and David, Israel’s first two kings, sinned. Both were reprimanded by a prophet. Both said chatati, “I have sinned.” But their fates were radically different. Saul lost his throne, David did not. The reason, said the Rav, was that David confessed immediately. Saul prevaricated and made excuses before admitting his sin.3

The stories of Judah and of his descendant David tell us that what mark a leader is not necessarily perfect righteousness. It is the ability to admit mistakes, to learn from them and grow from them. The Judah we see at the beginning of the story is not the man we see at the

end, just as the Moses we see at the burning bush – stammering, hesitant – is not the mighty hero we see at the end, “his sight undimmed, his natural energy unabated.” A leader is one who, though he may stumble and fall, arises more honest, humble and courageous than he was before.

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