

Everything You Need to Know About Judah: Dr. Julia Blum

Judah comes to represent the southern kingdom, with the capital in Jerusalem, while Israel was the name of northern kingdom. At first glance, the biblical portrait we are going to paint here seems not to be connected to Israel's 70th birthday at all! And yet, we all know that King David – who is the symbol of United Israel and the type and symbol of Messiah – was a descendant of Judah. The Book of Samuel makes it very clear that God bestows His anointing, for all time, on a monarchic line arising from the Tribe of Judah in the person of King David. And Jesus, who is designated 'Son of David', is also a descendant of Judah. Therefore, Judah's portrait has everything to do, both with Israel and with the Christian faith. When Israelites sing "*David Melech Israel*" ("David is King of Israel"), it all started with Judah. And when we read in Revelation about the "Lion from the tribe of Judah," it also started with Judah.

Have you ever wondered why? Why it was Judah – whose weaknesses, even sins, are revealed so clearly in the book of Genesis, both in the story of Joseph and the story of Tamar – who was honored with this extraordinary privilege? Moreover, if we know that Judah's tribe was destined to have this very unique honor – to bring forth King David and also Jesus – how do we connect the dots between this glorious destiny and Judah's questionable behavior in the book of Genesis?

Let's sort it out, then. Who was Judah and what do we know about him?

BEGINNING

Let's start from the beginning—from Judah's birth. When Leah gave birth to her fourth son, she declared: "*This time I will praise the Lord*". **Therefore she named him Judah.**" In English, of course, we don't see a connection: I believe this is one of the greatest losses we experience when reading our Bible in translation only – the meaning of the Hebrew names is completely lost in translation. Translations and adaptations don't simply change the original meaning, but render the names meaningless.

Unless we take time to go back into the Hebrew, the Biblical names of people and places in translation will continue to have no connection at all with the original reference points and ideas buried within the text itself. The connecting words: "therefore", or "because", or "so" seem meaningless in these cases – as in [Gen. 3:20](#): *And Adam: called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living*; or in [Gen. 25:26](#): *Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob*. However, when we read these Scriptures in Hebrew, the connections are very evident—and this becomes absolutely clear in the naming of Judah: the verb *lehodot* (להודות) means "to thank" or "to praise", and the Hebrew name for **Judah**, *Yehudah* (יהודה), is the noun form of the root Y-D-H (ידה), "to **thank**" or "to praise".

Therefore Judah's Hebrew name, *Yehudah* (יהודה), can be translated literally as "**thanksgiving**" – and this is something that many Bible readers are aware of (even those who don't know Hebrew). This is also the first, and very important, lesson of the name Judah: we need to *thank* the Lord in order to become part of His plan and His story, and in order to

bring His blessing upon our descendants. However, there is something more that we can learn from this name, but in order to do this, we need to go through—

THE MOST OVERLOOKED STORY IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS

Right after the sale of Joseph by his brothers in Genesis 37, we read the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38. In fact, this story breaks the flow of the Joseph narrative: instead of continuing to tell us about Joseph's going down to Egypt, the Torah finds it necessary to interrupt itself with the story of Judah. We read about Judah separating from his brothers (and wonder why), his marriage, the death of his sons, Tamar's seduction, and the climax of the story—Judah's **confession**. At first glance, this story is not connected at all to the sale of Joseph, and its position in the text seems random and strange. I've been teaching this lesson for a few years now, and every time I ask my students: Can you please explain why the story of Judah was placed in the middle of Joseph saga? Why does it interrupt the story of Joseph? So far, I've never received an answer to these questions.

Chapter 38 opens with the words: "*It came to pass at that time.*" This beginning already hints at some connection between the previous narrative and what we are about to read: this expression is usually used to indicate both chronological and thematic connections. Then we read "*that Judah departed from his brothers*". Why did Judah leave?

Let us return to the story of the sale. Have you ever realized that it was the voice of Judah that was absolutely decisive in this story: while Reuven had good intentions (but was unable to follow them through), it is according to Judah's suggestion that the destiny of Joseph was sealed and he was sold. Even in the middle of this terrible crime, we witness the amazing authority of Judah for the first (and definitely not the last) time, in the Joseph saga. As we will see later, Judah's heart will change, his character will be transformed—but this incredible authority, God's amazing gift to this tribe, will stay with him always.

And here we also find an explanation of why he left: we read in a midrash that the brothers blamed Judah and said: "You suggested that we sell Joseph, and we followed you. Had you suggested that we set Joseph free, we would have followed you also". That is why "*Judah departed from his brothers*"

We continue drawing our biblical portrait—continue watching Judah on these pages. We have seen that, by placing the story immediately after the sale of Joseph, the Torah lets us know that the stories are connected. Before a reader delves into Joseph's saga and follows the transformation of Joseph's character, Scripture shows us the transformation of Judah's character. In chapter 37, in the midst of all the horror of the brothers' crime, we witnessed the amazing authority that Judah's voice had: it was according to Judah's suggestion that Joseph was sold. This authority, God's special gift to Judah's tribe, was evident even then, but it is here, in the story of Judah and Tamar in chapter 38, that we see the real fruits of God's work in his heart. The transformation of his heart and his character.

TWO SONS

We might remember *that Judah departed from his brothers* and that midrash explains it by the fact that the brothers blamed Judah for the sale of Joseph. Without seeing this connection between the stories, the beginning of chapter 38 sounds almost awkward. Why, all of a sudden, does the Torah find it necessary to tell us about Judah's marriage to some Canaanite woman (we are not even given her name, she is "a daughter of Shua") and about the birth of his three sons from this marriage? And then we read:

⁶ *Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn; her name was Tamar.* ⁷ *But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death.* ⁸ *Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother."* ⁹ *But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother.* ¹⁰ *What he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also.* [1]

Let us pause here! Usually we see this story as the story of "Judah and Tamar" and completely forget the huge tragedy that befell Judah. There are no words to express the sorrow of a father whose two sons die one after another. Moreover, the Torah emphasizes that they did not die a natural death, but rather that "God put them to death" (יְהוָה: יָמַתְהוּם). This expression is very unusual—we seldom find it in the Torah. What was going on there? Was it a punishment? Was there a connection to the story of Joseph?

Throughout Joseph's saga, we discover different hints suggesting this connection. For instance, when later we read that two sons were born to Joseph in Egypt, the picture becomes almost graphic: The one who was responsible for the crime, loses his two children, while the one who was victim of the crime, has two sons born to him.

It becomes even clearer when we ponder the strange words of Reuven as he tries to convince Jacob to let Benjamin go with them to Egypt: *Then Reuven said to his father, "You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you."* [2] These words sound so bizarre: after all, Reuven's sons are Jacob's grandsons – why would Jacob kill his own grandsons?

However, if in the eyes of the brothers, the death of Judah's two sons was God's judgment and punishment for not bringing Joseph back, then we can understand that Reuven is in effect saying: I will bring him back – and if not, I am prepared to pay the price.

LEGAL BACKGROUND

Before proceeding any further, let us introduce some legal terms that will help us better understand the situation. According to the Levirate law (from the Latin *Levir brother in law*),

a brother was obliged to marry the widow of his deceased brother, and a son born of this union was considered the son of the dead man. In Hebrew, such a union was called *yibum*.

We read about it in Deuteronomy:

If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband's brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother unto her.^[3]

Later, the brother could refuse *yibum* by making a public declaration through the ceremony of *chalitzah* ([Deut. 25:5-10](#)). In earlier ages, however, *yibum* probably could not be evaded: a man was obliged to marry the widow of his brother. So, when Judah's first son, Er, died childless, Judah's second son, Onan had to marry Tamar by the law of *yibum*. When the LORD took his life also, according to the Levirate law, Judah's third son, Shelah (whose very name שלה means "hers"), had to marry Tamar. Judah knows his responsibility to give Tamar his third son, and he tries to avoid it. *Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up"—for he feared that he too would die, like his brothers.*^[4]

Judah doesn't want Shelah to marry Tamar, and he thinks that if Tamar is removed from the house, Shelah's duty to marry her will become less pressing as time passes. As a result, he leaves Tamar *aguna*, עגונה, literally "anchored" or "chained" —a halachic term for a Jewish woman who is "chained" to her marriage. The classic example is a man who has left on a journey and has not returned, or has gone into battle and is missing. An agunah has no husband – yet, she cannot marry another man, regardless of the amount of time that has passed since she first became an agunah. The situation of agunah is extremely difficult – and it's what we need to keep in mind as we enter the most intriguing part of the story.

THE HIDDEN MESSAGE

Finally we are entering the most interesting part of the story, the "action" of the story, which according to the text happens "a long time afterward"—a long time after the events we discussed in the previous part.

We read that a long time afterward", "the daughter of Shua, Judah's wife, died" – and when his period of mourning was over, "Judah went up to his sheepshearers at Timnah, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite". And here Tamar enters the picture again: we read that it was told Tamar, saying, "Look, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep." What did Tamar do upon hearing this news?

Let us remember that Tamar has been agunah for a long time already, for she was considered engaged to Shelah, and although "Shelah was grown, she was not given to him as a wife". After the tragedy she had experienced (twice), it appeared that she would remain childless. However she decided that her father-in-law's unfaithfulness would not stop her from having children and being a part of God's family, so she pretended to be a prostitute in order to trap her father-in-law. She "took off her widow's garments, covered herself with a veil and wrapped herself, and sat in an open place which was on the way to Timnah."

Most translations read that she sat in an open place. Sometimes, the name of the place where she was sitting is transliterated: “she sat down at the entrance to Enaim.” However, if we read the story of Judah and Tamar in Hebrew – we are struck by the name of the place: עֵינַיִם בְּפֶתַח BePetach Eyanim – literally: “in the opening of the eyes”. These words are incredibly meaningful and really designate what this story is all about—it’s about the “opening of the eyes”. At this point, Judah’s eyes are still closed, but they will not remain so. That’s why Tamar, God’s unexpected and unlikely tool, is sitting at this place – because God wants to open the eyes of Judah’s heart.

DISCERN, PLEASE

When Judah saw Tamar, he didn’t recognize her and took her for a prostitute. As payment for her service, he promised to send her a kid goat, which brings us back to the story of Joseph’s sale in the previous chapter. Do you remember that the brothers slaughtered a kid, dipped Joseph’s tunic in the blood, and then sent the tunic to their father? Moreover, when we see Jacob receiving this tunic, we can’t help but remember that the same set that Jacob was deceived with—special clothes and a slaughtered kid—was also used by Rebecca and Jacob to deceive Isaac! It seems that, beginning from Genesis 3, every time we have an animal and special garments, it serves as a cover-up for some serious sin or deceit. However, this story will end differently—it will be about the opening of the eyes. Therefore, Tamar asked for a pledge: “Will you give me a pledge till you send it?” She asked for his “signet and cord, and staff”, and surprisingly, he gave her these items.

We learn that through this trickery, Tamar becomes pregnant by Judah: “she conceived by him”. When, about three months later, Judah was told that “Tamar your daughter-in-law ... is with child by harlotry,” Judah said, “Bring her out and let her be burned!” Tamar was still considered engaged to Shelah, and Judah, as head of the family, had judicial powers. His decision was both harsh and quick.

But then, something very significant happens. When Tamar brings out Judah’s personal items, she says: Discern, I pray thee – הִקְרֵנָּה. In English, nothing strikes us as unusual in this sentence – however, in Hebrew one sees something that makes the connections between the two stories—the story of Joseph’s sale and the story of Judah and Tamar—absolutely evident. This expression, הִקְרֵנָּה, discern, recognize, appears only twice in the entire Torah, and can you guess where it is first used? Right in the previous chapter, when the brothers bring Joseph’s coat to Jacob and say: discern please whether it be thy son’s coat: הִקְרֵנָּה – discern, recognize, examine.

Once again, in the entire Torah, this expression appears only in these two chapters: Genesis 37 and 38. In the first case, Judah was a deceiver, but now he is the one deceived. Judah’s deception revisits him in his very own words – and it is at this very moment, when Judah hears these words, that his heart is pierced by the recognition. Not only by the recognition of his own things, but much more deeply, by the recognition of his own guilt. Now his eyes are opened indeed, and he has a true change of heart. He confessed and repented.

JUDAH'S CONFESSION

We now come to the climax of this story – Judah's confession: And Judah acknowledged them, and said, She hath been more righteous than I; because that I gave her not to Shelah my son.

We read a beautiful description of this transformation in Midrash: “Then Judah rose up and said: ... I make it known that with what measure a man metes it shall be measured unto him, be it for good or for evil, but happy the man that acknowledgeth his sins. Because I took the coat of Joseph, and colored it with the blood of a kid, and then laid it at the feet of my father, saying: Know now whether it be thy son's coat or not, therefore must I now confess, before the court, unto whom belongeth this signet, this mantle, and this staff.”

Of course Midrash just fills in the gaps that Scripture leaves out. Yet, there is a point not to be missed: Judah is the very first Biblical figure who is ready to acknowledge his sin. Instead of saying: ‘she is the one to blame’, like Adam, Judah says: ‘I am the one to blame.’ She has been more righteous than I. Judah is the first person in the book of Genesis – and therefore the entire Bible – to confess his sin, take responsibility for it, and change his behavior: he repents. Moreover, he doesn't do it under external pressure: her social status was incomparable lower than his—a woman, a widow, and probably Canaanite. If his word was against her word, nobody would believe her.

But God wanted to open the eyes of his heart, and therefore we witness his profound inner transformation. Scripture makes sure we know that the Judah who later comes to Egypt and talks to Joseph, is not the same Judah we saw in chapter 37: this Judah has gone through a deep transformation—he has a different heart.

My dear readers, together we have witnessed the profound inner transformation that Judah went through in chapter 38, in his story with Tamar. Why was it important for us to see this transformation? The Torah wants to make sure we know that the Judah who comes to Egypt and talks to Joseph, is not the same Judah that we saw in chapter 37, in the sale of Joseph. Yes, the amazing authority, God's special gift to Judah and his tribe, is still there, and we will see it, but this Judah has a completely different character—the eyes of his heart are opened! And now, being aware of this transformed Judah, let us proceed to the second part of the story, in order to be able to complete our biblical portrait.

This distress has come upon us

We are in Egypt now. The day has finally come, the long-awaited moment has arrived when Joseph's brothers come to Egypt and stand before him – the ten brothers who had nearly murdered him but took enough pity on him to listen to Judah's suggestion and sell him into slavery instead. Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. From this moment begins either a game of cat-and-mouse, or perhaps hot-and-cold; something starts to take place that is not quite visible from our outsider's vantage point because the main story-line is being played out within the participants' hearts.

Beginning from that moment, it is as if an invisible hand were stealthily creeping closer to that deep, dark and forbidden thing the brothers had concealed all these years, not only from others, but also from themselves. Each scene, each step taken in this story, fills their hearts with progressively greater confusion and fear; with each succeeding event, they feel the invisible hand getting “warmer”, slowly but surely nearing that secret, buried spot in their hearts.

We read that Joseph spoke roughly to them, accusing them of being spies and of coming to see the nakedness of the land. At first glance, all that Joseph says lacks any hint of comprehensibility. Why does he suddenly accuse them of spying? Why does he say to them, in this manner you shall be tested, and this is how it will be seen whether there is any truth in you”: bring your brother that is presently not with you? If he already accused them, then what could be the connection between the brother left at home and the accusation leveled against them? And yet, as unexpected as this accusation might have sounded to them with its subsequent demand to fetch their younger brother, despite its lack of sense and the total absence of a plausible connection with the accusation itself, it did not appear unreasonable to them. Then they said to one another, ‘We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us.’

This distress has come upon us... or, like Reuven said, “his blood is now required of us”. Note that God is not yet mentioned here – they have yet to understand that none other than the Almighty Himself has made them participants in this game. We still hear impersonal and passive verb forms: his blood is now required of us (נדרש דמו); they still credit what is happening to the whims and ruthlessness of the Egyptian governor and consequently, to nothing more than an unlucky turn of events, and yet... in their deep inner recesses, a curious spiritual connection between what is happening to them and that long-ago story, is already beginning to be revealed to them. Through the apparently irrational and inconsistent visible circumstances, another invisible logic begins to make its way to the surface – the logic of the movement of God’s Spirit in the heart of the person He is pursuing.

What is this that God has done to us?

It’s interesting that at this point, the Scripture doesn’t separate Judah from his brothers – we see the whole crowd together and we read that Joseph is talking to all the brothers—all ten of them. And yet, we know that scripture did separate Judah before and will separate him after: we saw him repenting and confessing in his story with Tamar, and we will see that it will be Judah’s speech and confession that will deeply touch Joseph’s heart and make him reveal himself to his brothers. So I think we can safely conclude that Judah is the one who is the most sensitive to the move of God’s spirit in this story.

Meanwhile, ten brothers set out on their way back and one of them notices the silver he had used to pay for the grain returned in his sack. Then their hearts failed them and they were afraid, saying to one another, ‘What is this that God has done to us?’ Was Judah the one who

said that? Was he the one who began to understand that everything happening to them is not simply a twist of fate, but God has done it to them. “What is this that God has done to us?”

My dear reader, I want you to see this profound transition: from “his blood is required” to “What is this that God is doing to us?” It’s not so evident in most translations, but in Hebrew this transition is very clear: from impersonal and passive verb forms describing just unlucky circumstances, to understanding that it is God who is doing it to them.

The Hebrew here literally says that they “trembled to one another”. After all, they had simply gone down to Egypt to buy grain (just as many centuries later the Samaritan woman simply went to the well for water) and they certainly didn’t expect, much less want, something unusual to happen on this trip. What now were these uncanny things happening to them? Like a doubly-exposed roll of film with its images overlapped, we can see God’s, as yet invisible, reality placed over their routine lives and beginning to show through. And without any doubt, Judah, who has experienced the terrible tragedy of losing two sons, who repented, who has a broken and humble heart, is the most sensitive one among the brothers to this invisible God reality.

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We are back to our biblical portrait – but before we arrive at that scene and the speech of Judah that not only precedes, but actually causes Joseph's revelation, we need to stop for a moment in Canaan. We will pick up this story exactly where we left off—we left the brothers in Canaan, frightened and confused. Yes, they brought the grain home, and even the silver they paid for it was returned along with it, but somehow this Egyptian situation began to be associated in their hearts with that other long-ago story of Joseph's sale, and although at first Jacob emphatically refuses to permit Benjamin to go back with them, as if closing the issue altogether, I think they all knew in their hearts that this story was destined to continue.

The parallels between Joseph's sale and this second part of the story are remarkable. Exactly as in chapter 37, apart from the anonymous voice of all the brothers (*They said to one another...* – [Gen. 37:19](#), [Gen. 42:21](#)), we hear two distinct voices here. The first belongs to Reuven: *Then Reuven spoke to his father, saying, "Kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you."* These words sound so strange—after all, Reuven's sons are Jacob's grandsons. Why would Jacob kill his own grandsons? We already discussed them, however, as a clear echo of Judah's tragedy: if in the eyes of the brothers, the death of Judah's two sons was God's judgment and punishment for not bringing Joseph back, then we can understand that Reuven is in effect saying: I will bring Benjamin back, and if not, I am prepared to pay the same price.

However, nothing happens after this emotional pledge of Reuven—just as nothing happens after his emotional words in chapter 37. As in the story of Joseph's sale, once again, it is the voice of Judah that becomes decisive. Reuven seems to have good intentions, but he doesn't have the character to follow up—he doesn't have the authority to make it happen. In chapter 37, he wanted to save Joseph, but he didn't—in the end, it was Judah's voice that sealed Joseph's destiny. In chapter 42, he wants Jacob to let Benjamin go with them to Egypt, but once again, nothing happens until Judah intervenes.

It's interesting that, unlike Reuven, Judah doesn't make any solemn pledges, doesn't swear – he just says: *"Send the lad with me... I myself will be surety for him; from my hand you shall require him"* [\[1\]](#) – but once again, it is after his intervention that everything changes. Judah has been given this authority from the very beginning, and therefore it is his voice that becomes decisive and makes a difference here also. Moreover, in Hebrew we can see how this amazing authority affects his father. After Judah's words, Israel (Jacob) says: *פִּי אֶחָד אֶמְכֹּר – If ...so.* The word *אֶמְכֹּר* is a redundant word in Hebrew, used only for stylistic purposes, and I believe it designates here some inner process in Jacob's heart: even though he has not received any additional rational arguments, after Judah's words we see him completely convinced and compelled to let Benjamin go.

THE SEARCH

I don't think I need to go into all the details of the narrative (by the way, one of my books – *If you are the Son of God* – is written around this fascinating story. If you are interested, *you can get them through my page on this blog*, <https://blog.israelbiblicalstudies.com/julia-blum/>). You would all know that, together with Benjamin, the brothers returned to Egypt and, contrary to their expectations, everything turned out well there—at least in the beginning. It got even better after once again they, now with Benjamin, came and stood before Joseph. He not only spoke with them in a rather softer and friendlier tone than previously, but also invited them to a joint meal where the brothers were seated in order, *the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth*, and once again they got the impression that somebody present knew them and was aware of their secrets – *and the men looked in astonishment at one another.* [2]

We know that at dawn they started back on the road, but we also know that not long before they had left, Joseph had commanded his steward (to his great puzzlement, I imagine, as well as to the puzzlement of those reading these chapters for the first time) to put his silver cup into Benjamin's sack. Next we read: *Joseph said to his steward, "Get up, follow the men and when you overtake them, say to them, 'Why have you repaid evil for good?' ... So he overtook them.* [3]

Stop here. Try to imagine what the eleven must have been experiencing: already anticipating their reunion with their father and their families; already sure that everything had gone smoothly and expediently; in the end it turned out that this was only a continuation of that same ongoing game of cat-and-mouse of their first meeting. His hand, which had allowed them to get but a few steps away, once again overtook them: *So he searched. He began with the oldest and left off with the youngest.* [4] Try to imagine them during the search: panting and crimson, indignant with the total injustice and groundlessness of this new accusation, their hearts filled with mixed feelings of puzzlement, fear, affront and triumph over each one's innocence proven.

Now everything is almost over, just one more moment and at last they will be released and can get moving on their way home again, far away from this strange place where evidently something mysterious is at work, far away from this sinister person who for some reason causes their hearts to shudder in remembrance of that long ago perpetrated crime. Just one more minute, only Benjamin's sack is left to be checked and he of course is the youngest, the purest among them, innocent of even what all of them are guilty of—is there even any need to search his bag at all? Dancing around nervously with impatience, each brother has already loaded up his donkey.

They are just about ready to get back on their way – hurry, come on, let’s get going... hey, what’s going on? What?!! I hear a moan of terror multiplied ten times over at the end of verse twelve: *the cup was found in Benjamin’s sack*, – and only Benjamin is left speechless and doesn’t say a word.

This is a critical point in the narrative, because from now on, this story becomes the story of Judah and his brothers. Next time, in our final article on Judah, we will uncover this final layer.

JUDAH AND HIS BROTHERS

Last time, we left off our story just after the cup had been found in Benjamin’s sack. I suppose you understand that this already was a test. Theoretically, ten brothers could have gone home—they were absolutely free to do that, the steward was very clear: “*he with whom it is found shall be my slave, and you shall be blameless.*”^[1] Moreover, they did have a good excuse—their families were starving and they really had to bring them food. So they all could have left Benjamin and gone home, and I can imagine Joseph sitting in his palace, almost biting his nails, waiting to see who would come back: only Benjamin or all the brothers. He was greatly relieved to see them all come back: the fact that they did all return was already a good sign—the brothers had passed another test.

And, as I mentioned last time, from now on this story becomes the story of Judah and his brothers. We read in [Gen. 44:14](#):

So Judah and his brothers came to Joseph’s house, and he was still there; and they fell before him on the ground.

Do you know where in the Bible we have the same expression: “Judah and his brothers”? When we open the New Testament, we read in Matthew: *Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot Judah and his brothers.* Judah and his brothers – this is how scripture sees this story. Why? In order to answer this question, we need to recall the story of Judah and Tamar and Judah’s repentance and confession there. Chapter 38, the Judah/Tamar narrative, became part of Joseph’s story precisely because of that: Scripture makes sure we know that the Judah, who later comes to Egypt and talks to Joseph, is not the same Judah we saw in chapter 37, in the story of Joseph’s sale. This Judah, who has experienced the terrible tragedy of losing two sons, has a broken and humble heart and has gone through deep repentance and transformation.

GOD HAS FOUND

What happens when Judah and his brothers come back and stand before Joseph after Benjamin’s alleged “crime” with stolen cup? It seems that their innocence of this accusation, which not long ago they were ready to defend with such fury, falls away before a wave of repentance which sweeps over their souls. At least we see this repentance in Judah’s words, as he is the one speaking:

And Judah said, What shall we say unto my lord? what shall we speak? or how shall we clear ourselves?^[2]

What can we say? What can we speak? And how can we justify ourselves? By now, he had certainly come to understand that what was happening to them was between them and God—the brothers had no reason and no way to justify themselves. The Spirit of God was at work behind this whole scene – touching their hearts and Himself leading the dialogue with them.

Whilst they were not guilty of that particular crime, under Judah’s leadership, they accepted the conviction and chastisement from the One before whom they had long ago so terribly sinned. Judah continues: “*God has found out the iniquity of your servants.*”^[3] In Hebrew it’s not, “found out”, rather it’s just “found” – מצא- as if truly all these years, they have been playing a game of hide and seek—had hidden their crime from God and finally, after all these games of hot-and-cold, God **had found** it! He had convicted them of their sin and pinned it on them. And even though at first they saw themselves as innocent regarding this particular sin, as they stood before God and opened their hearts to the rays of His light, their confession became profound and real. The words of Judah open one of the most beautiful stories of repentance – and I have absolutely no doubt that it is this repentance of Judah that makes this story so significant.

VAYIGASH

When we read the Bible in English, the whole story of the brothers returning to Joseph after the Benjamin “theft”—their speech, their repentance, and then Joseph revealing his identity—seems like one uninterrupted story. Not so in Hebrew, however. The Hebrew Torah, along with chapter divisions, also has divisions into Torah portions (*Parashat Shavua*) – and Parashat Shavua *Miketz* suddenly ends in the middle of the chapter 44, to give way to a new Parasha, *Vayigash*. There is an invisible dotted line, a pause, signifying that something very important is about to happen. Then the next Torah portion, *Vayigash*, begins with the words: *Then Judah came near unto him...* This move of Judah proves to be crucial: it is here, in *Vayigash*, that Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. The division into Torah portions makes it clear that the speech of Judah is perceived as something preceding, even instigating Joseph’s revelation. Why is this?

Now is the time to complete our biblical portrait with some final strokes. I’ve already mentioned that Judah’s Hebrew name, *Yehudah* (יהודה), can be translated literally as “*thanksgiving*” or “*praise*”: the verb *lehodot* (להודות) means “to thank” or “to praise”, and the Hebrew name *Yehudah* is the noun form of this root Y-D-H (ידה). I suppose, most of my readers know this. However, few would be aware that the verb, *lehodot*, has yet another meaning: to admit, to confess. For example, *Vidui*, the Hebrew name of a special prayer of confession read before and during *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement), comes from the same root. Before *Yom Kippur*, we recite special prayers called *Selichot*. The word *Selichot* means “confessions”. One of the most beautiful and profound prayers of this season says: *How can we complain? What can we say? What can we speak? And how can we justify ourselves? We will examine our ways and scrutinize them and we will return to You for Your hand is*

outstretched to accept returnees. Not with abundance, not with deeds do we come before you, like paupers and mendicants we knock on your door.

What can we say? What can we speak? And how can we justify ourselves? These are exactly the words Judah used when he and his brothers came back to Joseph – and probably here we can find an answer to the question that we asked in the beginning. We all know that Judah’s tribe was destined to have a very unique honor – to bring forth King David and also Jesus – why? Why was it Judah, whose weaknesses, even sins, are revealed so clearly in the book of Genesis, both in the story of Joseph and the story of Tamar, who was honored with this extraordinary privilege? Joseph was righteous – would it not be more logical to expect this special monarchic/messianic line to come from the tribes of Joseph (from Menashe or Ephraim)? Why Judah?

I hope the biblical portrait that I’ve been drawing here, helps you to see the answer: Judah is **a man of repentant heart!**

Judah was the very first Biblical figure who was ready to acknowledge his sin and repent; he repents twice in the book of Genesis—with Tamar and with Joseph; his words become part of Yom Kippur prayers and thus designate the attitude that the Lord desires from his children. I believe it’s because of this repentant heart that Judah was so special in the eyes of the Lord, as many centuries later Judah’s descendant David, also a man of repentant heart, was very special in the eyes of the Lord as well: *“The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit. You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God”*. ([Ps. 51:17](#)).

[\[1\] Gen.44:10](#)

[\[2\] Gen. 44:16](#)

[\[3\] Gen. 44:16](#)