

**Pardes from Jerusalem - Weekly Parsha Podcast –
Parshat Vayeishev**

**Yoseph and Yehudah – A Rift Extending Across History and
Within the Individual Self**

Based on a teaching from the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, in *Likkutei Sichot*, Volume 25; translated and adapted by Yanki Tauber.

The conflict between Yoseph and Yehudah runs like a seam across the entire history of Israel. At times Yosef gains the upper hand, and at times Yehudah prevails, but the schism always resurfaces. In Tractate *Sukkah* 52a-b, our sages even speak of two messiahs, each with a role to play in ushering in the final universal redemption – *mashiach ben Yosef*, descended from Yosef and *mashiach ben Dovid*, descended from King David, from the tribe of Yehuda. What are the implications for the people of Israel and for the individual's spiritual practice as well?

The conflict has its roots in Yaakov's marriages to Leah and Rachel. Yaakov's preference lay with Rachel --- she was his first love and the one he regarded as his primary wife. But Leah was the first he married, the first to bear his children and the one to emerge victorious in the sisters' competition to provide Yaakov with the most sons. All of Leah's six sons were born before Rachel's firstborn, Yoseph; Rachel had a total of two children, as she died while giving birth to her second son, Benyamin.

As Yaakov's firstborn, Leah's son Reuven is initially slated for leadership in all areas of Jewish life. But Reuven sins and his firstborn rights are transferred to three of his brothers: the priesthood goes to Leah's third son, Levi; the kingship to Leah's fourth, Yehudah; and the "birthright" (the right of the firstborn to a double portion in his father's heritage) to Yoseph. Thus, Yoseph's descendants comprise two tribes, Menasheh and Ephraim and receive two territories in the Holy Land.

Reuven's sin is itself an outgrowth of the Leah/Rachel rivalry, as Reuven interferes in his father's marital arrangements in protest after Rachel's passing of Yaakov's giving precedence to Rachel's maid, Bilhah, over Leah (Bereishit 35:22).

Yaakov transfers his love of Rachel to her son Yoseph, demonstrating his greater preference toward him over his brothers --- as he had demonstrated his preference of Rachel over Leah. The brother's jealousy is augmented by Yoseph's dreams, which Yoseph insists on repeatedly describing to them and to his father --- dreams which foretell his mastery over them.

This the sons of Leah are determined to prevent at any cost. Shimon and Levi plot to kill Yoseph; Yehudah prevents this, but oversees his sale into slavery.

But the brothers' victory is short-lived. Soon they find themselves in Egypt, at the mercy of a harsh viceroy who, unbeknownst to them, is their banished brother. They prostrate themselves before him in fulfillment of his dreams. Yehudah confronts Yoseph, but finds his considerable physical might and intellectual prowess bested by his younger brother. Then comes the moving scene in which Yoseph reveals himself to them and is reconciled with them.

Yoseph is now the undisputed leader of the fledgling nation. He is their protector and their source of sustenance. Even Yaakov bows to him.

When the people of Israel emerge from Egyptian exile, it is under the leadership of Moshe and Aaron, both Levites. But it is Yehoshua, a descendant of Yoseph (thru Ephraim), who leads them in their conquest of the Holy Land. Several generations later, another descendant of Yoseph (thru Menasheh), Gideon, liberates them from foreign rule and governs them (Shoftim 6-8). For 369 years the Mishkan, which as the forerunner of the Holy Temple serves as the spiritual epicenter of Jewish life, is situated in Shiloh, in the territory of Yoseph (Ephraim). When the people of Israel ask for a king, a descendant of Rachel, the Benyaminite Shaul is endowed with the crown.

Then, after centuries of Yosephian ascendancy, the pendulum swings once more. Dovid, the scion of Yehudah, is anointed as king; his struggles with King Shaul are a replay of the age-old Leah/Rachel rivalry over the leadership of Israel.

For seven years Dovid reigns in the Judean city of Hebron, while a son of Shaul, Yonatan, is the recognized king in the north. But then the sovereignty of Dovid is accepted by the entire people of Yisrael. Dovid makes his capital in another Judean city, Yerushalayim. His son Shlomo builds the Holy Temple on a part of the city which straddles the boundary between Yehudah and Benyamin. The schism seems to be healed, the people united, with the leadership firmly in the hands of Yehudah.

But once more the conflict resurfaces. Following Shlomo's death, Ya'ra'v'am, a descendant of Yoseph (Ephraim), leads a revolt against the royal house of Dovid. He even gets other tribes descended from Leah to join him in the renunciation of the Judean leadership. For the next 240 years, the Holy Land is split into two kingdoms: the northern kingdom of Yisrael, encompassing ten breakaway tribes under Yosephian leadership, and the southern kingdom of Yehudah. (Interestingly, the tribe of Benyamin remains loyal to the Judean throne). The sons of Yoseph are simply not prepared to accept the sovereignty of Yehudah.

This is most emphatically illustrated by the following Talmudic account in Tractate Sanhedrin 102a: "God Himself grabbed Ya'ra'v'am by his robe and said to him, 'Repent, and I, you and the son of Yeshai (King David) will stroll together in the Garden of Eden.' Asked Ya'ra'v'am, 'Who will walk first?' God answered, 'The son of Yeshai.' Said Ya'ra'v'am, 'If so, I am not interested.'"

The breach persists to this day. A century before the destruction of the first Temple, as recorded in II Kings 17: 1-6, Shalmanesser, King of Assyria, overran the northern kingdom of Israel and exiled the ten tribes to an unknown place. They were never heard from again. The rest of Jewish history, as we know it, is the story of the surviving tribes of Yehudah and Benyamin, a significant part of Levi (whose priests and Levites lived in cities throughout the Holy Land) and a small number of Jews from the other tribes who lived in the kingdom of Yehudah.

But the prophets promise that there will come a time when the rent halves of the people of Israel will be reunited. The messianic age will be heralded by a messiah from the tribe of Yoseph and a Dovidic messiah from the tribe of Yehudah; ultimately, however, the sovereignty of Yehudah will be established once and for all. In the words of the prophet, Ezekiel 37: 15-28, "I will make them into one nation in the land...and a single king shall be over them all...My servant Dovid

shall be king over them and they shall all have a single shepherd...and my servant Dovid shall be their prince forever.” In Isaiah 11:13, “The envy also of Ephraim shall depart, and they that harass Yehudah shall be cut off; Ephraim shall not envy Yehudah, and Yehudah shall not harass Ephraim.”

Through the lens of spirituality, we learn that the Yoseph/Yehudah conflict expresses a dichotomy that extends to every area of life: the tension between growth and self-fulfillment on the one hand and being in service with commitment to that which is greater than self on the other hand.

There are many identifiable motives to human actions and many ideas that suggest the purpose to human life. However, all fall under one of two general categories:

- a. For ourselves – to enjoy life, realize our potentials, experience different dimensions of reality and to achieve transcendence.
- b. For something greater than ourselves that compel us to be in service to whatever that may be – to society, history, ideas, God.

Indeed, we sense both “a” and “b” to be ever-present forces in our lives. **On the one hand**, we are strongly driven to better ourselves, to “get the most” out of every experience and opportunity. We also sense that this is not always a shallow selfishness, but something very deep and true in our souls --- something implanted in us by our Creator as intrinsic to our identity and purpose.

On the other hand, we are equally aware that we are part of something greater than ourselves – that if our existence does have meaning, it is only because it serves a reality beyond its own finite and subjective self.

We find both sensibilities expressed by the Torah and in the words of our sages. For example, the Torah in Deuteronomy 11:13-21, the 2nd portion of the *Shema* and in Leviticus 26: 3-13 repeatedly stresses that the Divine plan for life is for the good of the human being, both materially and spiritually. The Midrash in *Bereishit Rabba* 44:1 even makes the claim that “the mitzvot were given only to refine humanity.” The Talmud goes so far as to state in Tractate Sanhedrin 37a, “Every person is obligated to say, ‘the whole world was created for my sake.’” The Ba’al HaTanya, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi describes in *Likkutei Torah* the saga of the soul as a “descent for the purpose of ascent” --- the soul’s entry into the physical state entails a curtailment of its spiritual faculties and sensitivities, but the purpose of it all is that **it** be elevated by the challenges and achievements of earthly life.

Yet elsewhere we learn that the highest praise that the Torah has for Moshe Rabeinu, whom Maimonides refers to in his *Thirteen Fundamental Principles* as “the most perfect human being and father of all prophets,” is that he was simply a “servant of God” (Deuteronomy 34:5). Our sages repeatedly exhort us to strive for altruism in our lives, so that everything we do, as taught in Tractate Kiddushin 82b is permeated with the recognition that “I was not created but to serve my Creator.”

Our sages discuss this duality in terms of “learning” and “doing” – “Talmud Torah” and “observing the mitzvot.” Thus, they debate: Which is greater, learning or doing? Learning involves the development and perfection of self, while doing entails the surrender of self to the task at hand. Again, why was the human being placed on earth? To better, refine and perfect the self or to achieve the surrender of self in service to the Creator?

In Bereishit 29:17 we learn that Rachel was “of beautiful form and of beautiful appearance.” This embodies the drive for self-fulfillment and self-realization, while the humble and yielding Leah represents our capacity for service and surrender.

Rachel’s qualities were strongly emphasized in the handsome, charismatic and enterprising Yoseph, who unabashedly relates his dreams of greatness, and then proceeds to turn his every circumstance into a personal success. Sold as a slave, he soon become overseer of all his master’s possessions. Thrown into jail, he rises to a high position in the prison administration, and from there to viceroy of the most powerful nation on earth. His external beauty and successes manifest an inner spiritual perfection, as he perseveres in the face of moral tests and retains his righteousness in the most corrupting of environments.

Yehudah, in contradistinction, displays the humility and commitment of one to whom **life is a duty rather than an achievement**. He steps in to prevent the murder of Yoseph. He readily owns up to his responsibility for the sale of Yoseph and to his culpability in the incident with Tamar. He pledges to be accountable for Benjamin’s safety and, when the latter is retained by the Egyptian viceroy, offers himself as a slave in his place. He is the acknowledged leader of his brethren, but his is a leadership **burdened by responsibility and sustained by commitment**, rather than one that is **buoyed by self-confidence and driven by ambition**.

So Yoseph, whose name means “to add,” represents ongoing growth and achievement, while Yehudah, whose name means “to acknowledge” and “to admit,” is the paradigm of commitment and surrender of self.

These two forces vie for ascendancy in our every thought and feeling, in every choice we make and every action we take in the course of our lives. At times the one gains the upper hand; at times the other rules our lives. On the macro-historical level, these are the two contrasting and competing forces at play in the history of our people, as Yehudah and Yoseph vie for the leadership of Yisrael.

There is, however, a point at which these two forces do converge and unite. This is the point at which it is recognized that the refinement and perfection of the self can itself be an altruistic enterprise --- **when it is undertaken solely because this is what the Creator desires from us**. When it is appreciated that, as the Talmud resolves its above-cited debate, “Learning is greater because it brings one to deed.” A better self --- a more knowing, sensitive and accomplished self --- is a self who is better resourced to fulfill its purpose in creation. Indeed, the making of this better self **is** the fulfillment of its purpose in creation. **Ultimately, improving the self may actually represent the ultimate service of God.**

When a person attains this perfected and pinnacle place of love for the Divine, the Yehudah and the Yoseph in him are in full harmony with each other. His Yehudah reigns sovereign --- the ultimate criterion is in fact being in service to the Divine. **But**, the Yoseph in him is not silenced or suppressed. On the contrary: its passions are cultivated, its ambitions are encouraged, and its selfhood is fully integrated in the selflessness of the Judaic self.

And when this integration is achieved on the universal and cosmic level as well, we shall enter the age in which Ezekiel’s prophecy in 37:22-25 will be realized, “I will make them into one nation...and My servant Dovid shall be their prince forever.”