

Judah, Netanyahu, and Responsibility

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Family gatherings are often fraught, but none like Joseph's reunion with his brothers. Decades earlier, they sold him into slavery, and he suffered terribly. Now, though, Joseph has risen to greatness in Egypt. Having interpreted Pharaoh's dream to mean that seven years of plenty would be followed by a devastating seven-year famine, he's now Egypt's prime minister. Having amassed excess foodstuffs during good times, he is charged with distributing it to the hungry masses.

Among them are Jacob and his family. The patriarch sends most of his remaining sons to Egypt to procure food. They meet Joseph but do not recognize him. Joseph knows them on sight, though, and he treats them harshly. He desperately seeks reunion, particularly with his father and with his younger brother Benjamin; but he first needs to know if these brothers who sold him into slavery have grown and changed over the years. The only way for Joseph to determine that is to insist that his ten older brothers bring Benjamin to Egypt. How will they treat the youngest, their father's new favorite, now that Joseph is gone?

Joseph has his servants place a silver goblet in Benjamin's sack, and he then has all the brothers arrested for stealing the precious cup. The "thief" will be his slave, and the brothers will be sent back to their father without his beloved youngest son.

Now, one of those older brothers, Judah, has a problem. Jacob had begged his sons not to take Benjamin to Egypt, even though this prime minister had warned them never to return without their youngest brother. Judah had promised Jacob: "I will be responsible for him...; and if I do not bring him back to you..., I shall stand condemned before you for all time."ⁱ

Benjamin's wellbeing is not Judah's only concern. An event from his past is gnawing at him. You see, Judah was the one who came up with the idea of selling Joseph into slavery.ⁱⁱ Ever since coming to Egypt, the brothers have had an intuition that this Egyptian prime minister's harsh treatment is divine retribution, saying, "Oh, we are being punished on account of our brother! We saw his soul's distress when he pleaded with us, but we didn't listen—on that account this distress has come to us."ⁱⁱⁱ

Now, Judah is prepared to take responsibility for his wrongdoing. He offers himself as Joseph's slave in Benjamin's place. The man who had initiated the sale

of Jacob's favorite son into slavery is now willing to sacrifice himself in order to return the new favorite to their father.

In Judaism, the true test of repentance comes only when we are presented with circumstances similar to those in which we sinned in the past, but this time do the right thing.^{iv} Judah passes that test with flying colors. Joseph tearfully reveals his identity to his brothers, embraces them with love, and forgives their horrific mistreatment of him, urging them not to be “troubled [or] chagrined because you sold me here, for it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.”^v

Judah sets an appropriately high standard for accepting responsibility for wrongdoing. His story teaches important lessons about how one ought to respond to having missed the mark.

In Israel today, most officials admirably adhere to Judah's standard. Some ten days after October 7, Major General Aharon Haliva, head of the Israel Defense Force's Intelligence Directorate said, “The Military Intelligence Directorate, under my command, failed to warn of the terror attack carried out by Hamas... We failed in our most important mission, and as the head of the Military Intelligence Directorate, I bear full responsibility for the failure.”^{vi} Similarly, the Army's Chief of staff, Lieutenant General Herzi Halevi,^{vii} and Ronen Bar, head of Shin Bet, Israel's equivalent to the FBI, took responsibility.^{viii}

All of these men report to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Unlike them, Netanyahu has been in office for a generation. We now know that Israel had intelligence about Hamas's plans more than a year in advance—not in general terms, but with specific descriptions of the horror of October 7.^{ix}

Admittedly, the Prime Minister's role is unlike Judah's responsibility for selling Joseph into slavery. Hamas committed these atrocities, not Benjamin Netanyahu. However, Netanyahu's policies left Israel vulnerable to Hamas terror. As Tal Schneider wrote on October 8, “For years, ... Netanyahu took an approach that divided power between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank—bringing Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to his knees while making moves that propped up the Hamas terror group. The idea was to prevent Abbas—or anyone else in the Palestinian Authority's West Bank government—from advancing toward the establishment of a Palestinian State... Israeli policy was to treat the Palestinian Authority as a burden and Hamas as an asset.”^x

For years, Netanyahu authorized Qatar to fund Hamas. As the Israeli daily *Haaretz* reported this week, “The \$30 million brought to the Gaza Strip in suitcases every month was supposedly earmarked for government employees' salaries, assistance to poor families and fuel, but in practice they were used to empower

Hamas. The government employees work for Hamas...and the organization used the fuel to build its enormous tunnel networks.” “Money in suitcases,” is not a metaphor, because the United States imposes sanctions on those who fund terrorist organizations. “Netanyahu’s agreement and support for transfer of money to Hamas despite its designation as a terrorist organization was in practice a signal to international authorities that Israel is not genuinely taking on Hamas, neither militarily nor economically. And if the main victim of Hamas terrorism live[d] in peace with the transfer of suitcases of dollars to the organizations, why should other parties fight it?”^{xi}

Perhaps because he is aware of his culpability, Netanyahu deflects blame. Three weeks after October 7, he repeated claims he has made since October 7, this time in an after-midnight tweet, “Contrary to false claims: Under no circumstances and at no stage was Prime Minister Netanyahu warned of Hamas’s war intentions.”^{xii}

Before we learned that Hamas’s plans had been in the works for more than a year, some theorized that the terrorist group perceived Israel to be weakened by political divisions. Israelis were indeed divided by the Netanyahu government’s attempt to use their democratic election to overhaul Israel’s judiciary and its powers in a way that would effectively end democracy. More than a million Israelis participated in protests, January through September, at least weekly, against the government and its antidemocratic goals.

Israelis, though, have shown the world that, while they disagree with one another frequently and loudly, they are united against terror. Large majorities have also made clear to pollsters that Netanyahu ought not continue as prime minister.^{xiii}

If only Netanyahu were more like our forebear Judah. Like Prime Minister Netanyahu, Judah made devastating mistakes, destructive to the Children of Israel. Drawing close to the man he did not know was his brother Joseph, though, Judah takes the first step toward healing divisions within his family, representing the whole people of Israel. The result is imperfect but meaningful unity, healing among the family and the people.

Torah’s last words about the relationship between Joseph and his brothers are, “Thus did [Joseph] comfort [his brothers] and speak straight to their hearts.”^{xiv} Let me add to the many dreams for Israel articulated since October 7: Let Prime Minister Netanyahu take responsibility for his wrongdoing and for its devastating impact, and let the family of Israel be healed.

Amen

ⁱ Genesis 43:9.

ⁱⁱ Genesis 37:26-27.

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 42:21.

^{iv} Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance, 2.1.

^v Genesis 45:5.

^{vi} Emanuel Fabian, "IDF intel chief says he 'bears full responsibility' for not warning of Hamas attack," *The Times of Israel*, October 17, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-intel-chief-says-he-bears-full-responsibility-for-not-warning-of-hamas-attack/#:~:text=Gen%20Aharon%20Haliva%20said%20in,full%20responsibility%20for%20the%20failure.>

^{vii} Emanuel Fabian and Amy Spiro, "IDF chief admits failures and promises investigation; vows to 'dismantle' Hamas," *The Times of Israel*, October 12, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-chief-admits-failures-and-promises-investigation-vows-to-dismantle-hamas/>.

^{viii} <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/10/16/head-of-israeli-security-service-takes-responsibility-for-misreading-hamas-attack-00121827>.

^{ix} Ronen Bergman and Adam Goldman, "Israel Knew Hamas's Attack Plan More Than a Year Ago," *The New York Times*, November 30, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/30/world/middleeast/israel-hamas-attack-intelligence.html#:~:text=A%20blueprint%20reviewed%20by%20The,aspirational%20and%20ignored%20specific%20warnings.&text=Israeli%20officials%20obtained%20Hamas%27s%20battle,documents%2C%20emails%20and%20interviews%20show.>

^x Tal Schneider, "For years, Netanyahu propped up Hamas. Now it's blown up in our faces," *The Times of Israel*, October 8, 2023. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/for-years-netanyahu-propped-up-hamas-now-its-blown-up-in-our-faces/>.

^{xi} Sami Peretz, "How Netanyahu Enabled October 7 with Suitcases of Cash," *Haaretz*, December 20, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2023-12-20/ty-article-opinion/.premium/how-netanyahu-enabled-october-7-with-suitcases-of-cash/0000018c-8397-d219-a5bf-b7ff40660000#>.

^{xii} <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-sharply-criticized-for-post-blaming-intelligence-chiefs-for-oct-7-failure/#:~:text=Netanyahu%20slammed%20for%20post%20blaming,apologizes%20%7C%20The%20Times%20of%20Israel>

^{xiii} <https://www.timesofisrael.com/poll-finds-netanyahu-would-be-pummeled-by-gantz-were-elections-held-today/#:~:text=When%20asked%20about%20their%20favored,massacre%2C%20painted%20a%20similar%20picture.,>

^{xiv} Genesis 50:21.