

PARSHAT VAYECHI

8 - 14 Tevet 5786
28 December 2025 - 3
January 2026

Torah: Genesis 47:28-50:26
Haftorah: Kings I 2:1-12

PSALMS DAILY

Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

Psalm 117

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.
2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

SEFER HAMITZVOT

Positive Mitzvah 246 Laws of Claims

We are commanded to adjudicate monetary cases between litigants [according to the laws outlined in the Torah].

Positive Mitzvah 248 Laws of Inheritance

We are commanded regarding the laws of inheritance [to follow the inheritance laws detailed in the Torah]. Included in this Mitzvah is that the firstborn receives a double portion from his father's estate.

WHAT MAKES A LEADER?

"What makes a good leader?" I typed into Google. Within 0.15 seconds, I had 57,500,000 results. Apparently I'm not the only one with that question.

Is it character or personality that produces better results? Is it vision, charisma, charm, or great oratory skills? These are but a few of the necessary components according to my on-line search.

We'd all like to be more effective in our respective leadership functions, be it in the workplace, at home, or community life. What does the Torah say about this question? How does G-d in His infinite wisdom define the role of a leader?

Passed Over for the Crown

Before his passing, Jacob saw fit to bless his children and impart to them his last will and testament. They each merited a private audience, in which he spoke to them candidly; his blessing interspersed with rebuke, when necessary.

It was in Jacob's meeting with Reuben that he notified him about the unfortunate losses he had incurred due to his indiscretion with regards to "his father's bed":

Jacob's bed had been regularly situated in Rachel's tent, which he considered his primary residence. When Rachel died, Jacob moved his bed into the tent of Bilhah, Rachel's handmaiden. Reuben perceived this as a slight to his mother Leah. "If my mother's sister was a rival of my mother," he argued, "should my mother's sister's handmaiden also be a rival of my mother?" So he unilaterally went and moved his father's bed into his mother's tent. As the firstborn, Reuben had a formidable birthright. His descendants were destined to be the royalty of Israel. But alas, because of his shortcoming, that right was taken from him and the kingship of Israel was transferred to Judah.

But why Judah?

Courage and Nobility!

Our sages explain that Judah earned the kingship because of the great courage and restraint he exercised both in regards to Joseph and Tamar. In that merit, the Israelite kings – the future Davidic dynasty – would emerge from his bloodline alone.

After the brothers had thrown Joseph into the pit, leaving him to languish until his death, Judah turned to his brothers and suggested: "What gain will there be if we kill our brother? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites..." The brothers heeded his advice, and thereby Joseph's life was saved.

Later, when his former daughter-in-law Tamar was being led to execution because of her alleged promiscuity, Judah had the humility to admit that it was in fact he who fathered the children that Tamar was carrying—thus saving her life as well.

Courage and Nobility?!

Based on a careful reading of the narratives, however, it seems ironic that the leadership was transferred from Reuben to Judah.

"Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. They saw him from afar; and when he had not yet approached them, they conspired to kill him... Reuben heard, and he rescued him from their hand; he said, 'We will not strike him mortally!' And Reuben said to them, 'Do not shed blood! Throw him into this pit in the wilderness, but send no hand against him'..." - Genesis 37:17-21.

Reuben, it turns out, was at least as heroic as Judah. He undoubtedly saved Joseph's life when he convinced the brothers not to kill him.

Furthermore, when we read a little further in the text it seems that Reuben's efforts were even more heroic than those of Judah!

"...in order to rescue him from their hand, to return him to his father."

In a somewhat rare display of biblical narrative, G-d Himself bore witness that Reuben's intention, when advising his brothers to cast Joseph into the pit, was only to rescue Joseph. He planned on returning later on in order to bring him up from the pit and return him to their father Jacob.

And return later he indeed did. And when he found that Joseph was no longer in the pit – for he had been sold to the Ishmaelites as per Judah's suggestion – he rent his garments and mournfully exclaimed, "The boy is gone! What will I do now?!"

Now contrast that with Judah who callously said, "Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites!"

Reuben had planned on rescuing Joseph completely, to return him to their father, while Judah suggested that instead of killing the boy they should sell him as a slave!

Yes, it's true that both Reuben and Judah saved Joseph from death; but the end results they had in mind could not have been more different.

Can we honestly compare Judah's efforts to Reuben's?

One more point:

While Reuben was driven by his desire to bring his brother home, Judah said to his brothers, "What gain will there be if we kill our brother? Come, let us sell him."

When Judah "saved" Joseph he was motivated by financial benefits!

Apparently, if Joseph would simply be allowed to die a slow death in the pit, that wouldn't bring them any "gain"!

Humility Rules

The creative bible reader might suggest a different reasoning behind Jacob's choice of Judah over Reuben. A true sign of a leader, Jacob felt, is humility, not courage. A leader is not one who can conquer others but one who can conquer himself. "Who is mighty?" ask our Sages. "One who masters his inclination."

In the words of Rashi, "Lucky is the generation whose leader is humble enough to bring a sin offering for a mistake he has made."

Perhaps Jacob felt that Judah excelled in this area. One can only imagine the public shame and even ridicule Judah was subjected to upon confessing that the woman he had sentenced to death was in fact impregnated by none other than himself! And yet, humiliation notwithstanding, he admitted his guilt.

However, this solution also leaves much to be desired. For in regards to humility, too, Reuben exceeded Judah.

Reuben also confessed and repented for his shortcoming. Yet, unlike Judah who was motivated (at least partially) based on the knowledge that innocent people would die if he did not, Reuben was motivated to confess and repent simply because he realized that he had erred.

Furthermore, it must've taken incredible humility for Reuben to confess, because he hadn't "sinned" to pursue his own interests, but to safeguard his mother's honor. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the excuses he could have made for himself, repent he did.

And while we don't find any indication in the narrative that Judah's confession and repentance lasted more than the few moments it took to make his dramatic announcement, Reuben continued to repent for more than nine years! Apparently he took his shortcomings very much to heart and constantly strove to better himself - true signs of a humble man.

So what was Jacob thinking when he transferred the monarchy to Judah?

The Problem Solver

After outlining to Pharaoh the national disaster about to hit Egypt, Joseph offered unsolicited advice: "Gather all the food of the approaching good years; amass grain... and safeguard it. The food will be a reserve... And Pharaoh said to his servants, 'Could we find like this a man...?'"



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One simple question: Was there something so brilliant in Joseph's idea? Ask any small child what to do in the event that you have lots of food now but you'll have nothing later on, and he'll reiterate Joseph's words: "Save some of what you have now for later."

Does that make the child fit to rule the world? But Pharaoh was indeed very wise. He recognized Joseph as a leader because he focused not only on the problems, but on how to fix them. He saw things through a different lens; his were practical glasses and he knew how to achieve results.

Upon identifying the impending catastrophe, Joseph didn't sigh or wring his hands; in the very same sentence, he immediately spoke of action.

Many people see problems but few know how to solve them. Rare are the people with vision. Even rarer are those who can translate vision into practice. Joseph was one such man and Pharaoh was wise enough to recognize that.

The uniqueness of a leader is his ability to implement. His character, motives, and ideas are of less importance. If one cannot produce results they are not fit to lead. He can advise but cannot rule.

Jacob's Choice

Using this paradigm, we can fully appreciate Jacob's choice of Judah to assume the royal mantle.

Reuben might have surpassed Judah in character – purity of motives, sensitivity, piety and humility – but when considering the quality that makes one fit to lead, namely the ability to produce results, Judah exceeded Reuben.

"Reuben returned to the pit – and behold! – Joseph was not in the pit!"

Apparently, Reuben wasn't present when Joseph was sold.

Although very well-intentioned in his desire to save Joseph, at crunch time – when the time had come to act – Reuben was nowhere to be found.

Moreover, Reuben's efforts, while saving Joseph from one form of certain death at the hands of his brothers, only served to facilitate a different meeting with death at the hands of the poisonous snakes and scorpions that swarmed in the pit!

Contrast that with Judah, who may have assisted in Joseph's sale, but in doing so actually saved Joseph's life.

Judah's ability to produce results was also expressed in his rescue of Tamar, whose life

and those of her unborn children were saved as a direct result of Judah's confession.

Selfless

Where was Reuben at so critical a time? What could possibly have been more important than saving his brother's life?

"He was busy with his sackcloth and fasting for having rearranged his father's bed." While Joseph's fate hung in the balance, Reuben was off repenting.

Reuben, however pious – and he truly was – had placed his own interests (albeit spiritual) before those of his brother.

In addition to a leader's ability to act, he must put others before himself.

In both of these regards – the knack for practical results and the ability to put others first – Judah proved superior to Reuben.

If Reuben had not been busy repenting when Joseph was struggling for his life, Joseph may not have been sold. In essence, Reuben missed the chance to stop a bitter exile short in its tracks.

Judah's actions, on the other hand, albeit not as purely motivated, saved three lives, including that of Peretz, the antecedent of Moshiach. In effect, he jumpstarted the redemption!

What in It for Me?

If we want to lead, we must look for answers, not questions. To find faults are easy, to fix them is not. Good intentions amount to little; good deeds change the world. If we train ourselves to bring positive change to the lives of others, we will be qualified to lead.

The same is true when we look for a leader. We must ask ourselves, can this person effect change, or does he/she only speak of it? Will our workplace produce more and better under this person's management? Will our community grow in size and spirit if this individual is chosen to oversee it? Will our nation securely prosper with this person as president?

Additionally, to lead means to lose ourselves for another; not to find ourselves through them. This we can only accomplish if we are willing to sacrifice of ourselves and our own development. If we seek to lead in order to promote ourselves, we are doomed to failure. At one point or another, the kingdom will fall. It might last for a while but ultimately the time will come when there is a conflict of interest between the leader and the people.

More for Me...

Good deeds, even when motivated by selfish or less-than-pure motives, remain good deeds. In

the world of action, intentions are relatively irrelevant.

Of course we must strive to refine ourselves and to be driven by altruistic considerations alone; but if someone else will lose out as a result, adulterated action takes precedence over unadulterated intentions.

In the words of the Mishnah, "Action is paramount."

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VAYECHI IN A NUTSHELL

The name of the Parshah, "Vayechi," means "And he lived" and it is found in Genesis 47:28. Jacob lives the final 17 years of his life in Egypt. Before his passing (in 2255, or 1506 BCE), he asks Joseph to take an oath that he will bury him in the Holy Land. He blesses Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, elevating them to the status of his own sons as progenitors of tribes within the nation of Israel.

The patriarch desires to reveal the end of days to his children, but is prevented from doing so.

Jacob blesses his sons, assigning to each his role as a tribe: Judah will produce leaders, legislators and kings; priests will come from Levi, scholars from Issachar, seafarers from Zebulun, schoolteachers from Simeon, soldiers from Gad, judges from Dan, olive-growers from Asher, and so on. Reuben is rebuked for "confusing his father's marriage bed"; Simeon and Levi, for the massacre of Shechem and the plot against Joseph. Naphtali is granted the swiftness of a deer, Benjamin the ferociousness of a wolf, and Joseph is blessed with beauty and fertility.

A large funeral procession consisting of Jacob's descendants, Pharaoh's ministers, the leading citizens of Egypt and the Egyptian cavalry accompanies Jacob on his final journey to the Holy Land, where he is buried in the Machpelah Cave in Hebron.

Joseph, too, dies in Egypt, at the age of 110 (in 2309, or 1452 BCE). He, too, instructs that his bones be taken out of Egypt and buried in the Holy Land, but this would come to pass only with the Israelites' exodus from Egypt many years later. Before his passing, Joseph conveys to the Children of Israel the testament from which they will draw their hope and faith in the difficult years to come: "G-d will surely remember you, and bring you up out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, 8 Tevet 5786 - 28 December 2025

Torah Translated Into Greek (246 BCE)

In a second attempt to translate the Torah into Greek (after an unsuccessful attempt 61 years earlier), the ruling Greek-Egyptian emperor Ptolemy gathered 72 Torah sages, had them sequestered in 72 separate rooms, and ordered them to each produce a translation. On the 8th of Tevet of the year 3515 (246 BCE) they produced 72 corresponding translations, including identical changes in 13 places (where they each felt that a literal translation would constitute a corruption of the Torah's true meaning). This Greek rendition became known as the Septuagint, "of the seventy" (though later versions that carry this name are not

believed to be true to the originals). Greek became a significant second language among Jews as a result of this translation. During Talmudic times, 8 Tevet was observed by some as a fast day, expressing the fear of the detrimental effect of the translation.

Monday, 9 Tevet 5786 - 29 December 2025

Passing of Ezra (313 BCE)

Ezra, who led the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel after the Babylonian exile (3338-3408, or 423-353 BCE), oversaw the building of the Second Temple, canonized the 24 books of the Holy Scriptures ("Bible") and, as head of the "Great Assembly" legislated a series of laws and practices (including formalized prayer) which left

a strong imprint on Judaism to this very day. He passed away on the 9th of Tevet 3448 (313 BCE) - exactly 1000 years after the Giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. The passing of Ezra marked the end of the "Era of Prophecy".

Tuesday, 10 Tevet 5786 - 30 December 2025

Siege of Jerusalem (425 BCE)

On the 10th of Tevet 3336 (425 BCE), the armies of the Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem. Thirty months later - on Tammuz 17, 3338 (423 BCE) - the city walls were breached, and on the 9th Av of that year, the first Holy Temple was destroyed. The Jewish people were exiled to Babylonia for 70 years.