

Vayigash, 5781
Rabbi Zev Wiener

There is perhaps no greater example of personal heroism in the entire Torah than Yehuda's confrontation of Yosef to protect Binyamin. Other acts of courage and valor, such as Avraham's emigration from his homeland and Moshe's brushes with Pharaoh -- while deeply admirable -- were often performed with the Divine reassurance of a favorable outcome. Yehuda, however, had to act spontaneously without any such reassurance, and had to confront a tyrant of the world's superpower who had already threatened him and his brothers. He did not have the luxury to sleep on it, to consult a friend, or to come back later. He did not even have a just or morally compelling argument to hide behind: to the eyes of everyone there, Binyamin was a thief deserving of punishment.

And yet, he did it anyway.

Through his courage, Yehuda is analogized to a lion, the ultimate symbol of גבורה -- strength and courage (see Avot 5:20). Yehuda's גבורה stemmed from the fact that losing Binyamin was simply not an option. He had given his unqualified word to his father that Binyamin would return, and no matter what obstacle stood before him, whether he liked it or not, he would need to find a way through it. With his back against the wall, his only option was to keep fighting, taking bold and drastic measures to save his brother.

Like Yehuda, we too have promised our own Father to look after our siblings. The Talmud teaches that in the Plains of Moav, we all took an oath that established the principle of ערבות -- mutual responsibility: כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה. When we see our brothers and sisters ensnared, we are solemnly bound to never leave them behind. G-d places severe challenges into our community that entrap so many, and then looks at each of us and says, "*Nu? Figure it out.*" Mental illness, addiction, singlehood, and so many other rampant problems are no less formidable tyrants than Yehuda had to face. And yes, life is not easy for anyone, and it is hard enough to keep ourselves afloat, let alone to take on the problems of others. But our Parasha teaches that we simply have no choice. To be a "Yehudi" means to follow in the footsteps of Yehuda -- to find the inner lion that exists within each of us, summoning strength we never knew we had, to overcome even the most impossible of challenges for the sake of our siblings and our world.

Our Sages teach that half of the Beit HaMikdash stood in the portion of Yehuda, and half stood in the portion of Binyamin (Yoma 12a). There is no greater site to house the Divine Presence than the symbol of the bond between Yehuda and Binyamin -- one brother holding up another brother from falling into a hopeless pit. I sometimes worry that we can be so focused on our own service towards G-d, that we do not hear Him silently screaming at us to stop looking at Him, and to instead turn towards all of His children who are in so much pain...and to go do something about it. May each of us merit to be able to tell our Father, when we return to him after 120, that we never gave up on His children.