

# Why Judah Lost His Cool

Diplomacy is great, but sometimes you gotta throw down the gauntlet

By Aharon Loschak

What's the difference between the way your three-year-old asks for ice cream and the way you ask your boss for a raise?

Well, your toddler will probably demand, kick, and scream for his or her two scoops of frozen, sugary joy. You, however, will hopefully employ a nifty little tool called "diplomacy" or "negotiation." No kicking and screaming, just calm reasoning, with arguments that make your boss feel so good, he or she is unable to refuse your request.



This tool is one we employ all the time as we navigate life, from big items like negotiating a raise to smaller interactions like trying to convince your spouse to join you hiking, or getting your kid to do her homework. There's almost always a level of negotiation at play.

And more often than not, we try to play nice. Sure, you'll always encounter that one coworker or friend who's demanding and overly dramatic, but it's probably safe to say most of us prefer diplomacy. Only after multiple failed attempts do we start banging our fists on the table.

Well, I'm here to tell you that sometimes, that's not going to cut it. When it comes to certain things in life, you'd better be throwing fire from the get-go.

## Judah Confronts Joseph

My cue is from a dramatic confrontation described in this week's parshah. After the years-long saga between Joseph and his brothers, things have come to a head. Joseph has orchestrated a cunning plan to ensnare his youngest brother Benjamin, and Judah is beside himself. Having promised his father that he would take responsibility for Benjamin at all costs, the prospect of this Egyptian prince nabbing his little brother has Judah incensed to his very core.

And so we read, "And Judah confronted Joseph... 'let now your servant speak something into my lord's ears, and let not your wrath be kindled against your servant.'"<sup>1</sup>

Judah isn't making nice here. He's not some well-dressed bureaucrat coolly negotiating a peace treaty in a gilded hall. Not at all. He's brash, confrontational, and downright reckless, so much so that he has to throw in the caveat, "Hey, you're not going to like what I'm about to say, so try not to get too upset with me."

Why? Why does Judah immediately resort to tough negotiating tactics? Why is he shouting and making a scene before even trying some good old diplomacy?

## When It Matters

The answer is really quite simple: when it truly matters, there's no time for diplomacy.

If someone cuts your finger, you yelp in pain. It's a natural, visceral reaction. There's nothing you can do about it. No one would dream of saying, "Excuse me, you just cut my finger, can you try not to do that next time?" That's preposterous. If you're in acute pain, everything inside you tells you to kick and scream.

Because it matters.

Judah's confrontation teaches us an important lesson: there are things that matter, and for those things, we can't waste any time or give way to some sort of moral equivalency until we make it right.

If you really care for something, if it really bothers you and shakes a value you hold dear, you bet you'll be pounding your fist on the table and demanding change.

For Judah, it was his brother Benjamin, more specifically, the specter of his abandonment to Egyptian incarceration. Judah knew full well that were his brother to fall into the clutches of this barbaric and depraved culture, it would spell the end of his glorious upbringing, a death knell to the Abrahamic values inculcated in him with sweat, blood, and tears.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had spent years defying the entire world to introduce monotheism. They suffered bitterly for it, and their entire lives were dedicated to the cause. To lose even one child of their majestic dynasty would be a travesty!

For Judah, it was unfathomable. To lose a Jewish child to the cesspool of Egypt? Absolutely not!<sup>2</sup>

A fire ignited within him, an urgent drive that granted neither time nor space to negotiate. So he summoned his inner ninja and did the unthinkable: he confronted the prince of Egypt himself and demanded the release of the Jewish boy. There was nothing to discuss—it simply had to happen!<sup>3</sup>

## What Matters to You?

There's hardly a person walking this planet who doesn't hold something so close to his or her heart that they're willing to throw in a Molotov cocktail and see the whole thing blow up rather than give in. It may be a conviction, a value, a person, or all of the above, but should you seek to hack away at it, they will leave no room for negotiation, no time to play nice, and immediately, forcefully, and viscerally push back.

For Judah, it was the value of a Jewish education. To watch Benjamin fall prey to Egyptian depravity was unthinkable.

The Jewish people have carried this value for millennia, withstanding tremendous odds to ensure that our heritage can be transmitted to every Jewish child. When anyone dared challenge that value—through oppression, assimilation, or simple apathy—our ancestors immediately and forcefully pushed back, casting diplomacy aside for what was *really* important.

Such was the value of Judah and the collective Jewish parent thereafter.

What is it for you?

#### FOOTNOTES

1. [Genesis 44:18](#).
2. This sheds light on a curious part of Judah's behavior: Just two verses prior ([Genesis 44:16](#)), Judah suggests that *all* the brothers become indentured to Egypt. He only gets worked up after Joseph declines and counters that he will only take Benjamin. Why? Previously, it was on Judah's terms, part of what he saw as a G-dly plan, and as such, there was no risk to the collective family's Jewish upbringing. By contrast, for Benjamin to be left alone as a prisoner on Joseph's terms posed a great moral risk, one which Judah was not willing to take.
3. Based on Likutei Sichot, vol. 20, pp. 216-217.

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