



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayechi

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

December 26, 2015

Vayechi

**Jewish Stereotypes:
Lessons from the Lion King**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayechi > Jewish Stereotypes: Lessons from the Lion King

December 26, 2015

ABSTRACT

Jews are smart. Jews are frugal. Jews are short. Jews are bald. Jews have extended proboscises. Jews are neurotic. Jews are wimps. Jews have power. Jews control the media. Jews control the banks. Jews control Hollywood. Jews control the world...

The list of Jewish stereotypes – some accurate, many preposterously anti-Semitic – goes on and on.

Here is a Jewish stereotype that is true. One that speaks of the Jews’ purpose and nature.

Jews are the Lions of Judah.

Jews are proud and prideful, and yet humble and grateful.

Jews are Jews.

JEWISH STEREOTYPES: LESSONS FROM THE LION KING

1. Stereotypical Humor (Joke 1)

Mr. Altmann and his secretary were sitting in a coffeehouse in Berlin in 1935. "Herr Altmann," said his secretary, "I notice you're reading *Der Stürmer*! I can't understand why. A Nazi libel sheet! Are you some kind of masochist?"

"On the contrary, Frau Epstein. When I used to read the Jewish papers, all I learned about were pogroms in Russia, riots in Palestine, and assimilation in America. But now that I read *Der Stürmer*, I see so much more: that the Jews control all the banks, dominate the arts and are on the verge of taking over the entire world. You know - it makes me feel a whole lot better!"

2. Who are the Jews

- Jews are smart. Jews are frugal. Jews don't buy retail.
- Jews are short. Jews are bald. Jews have extended proboscises.
- Jews are neurotic. Jews are nebbishes. Jews look like Woody Allen.
- Jews control the media. Jews control the banks. Jews control Hollywood. Jews control the world...

The list of Jewish stereotypes - some accurate, most preposterous and anti-Semitic - goes on and on.

But here is one Jewish stereotype that is true. Indeed, it defines the Jews' purpose and nature.

Jews are the Lions of Judah.

And we know that from this week's Torah reading.

3. Parshat Vayechi

This week we read the final portion of the Book of Genesis, *Parshat Vayechi*. It speaks of Jacob's final days, of how – on his deathbed – he blessed each one of his sons, who would give rise to the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

In blessing his sons, Jacob also defined each one of their inimitable characters – from the firstborn, Reuben, whom he compared to water, to Naftali whom he compared to a gazelle, to Benjamin whom he compared to a wolf, and so forth.

One could say that Jewish stereotypes – at least the legitimate ones, the true characteristics – are rooted in Jacob's blessings and character descriptions of his sons.

Standing out among these is one in particular – the eloquent blessing to Judah whose royal family line was destined to become the rulers of the Nation of Israel:

“Judah (Yehudah), your brothers shall submit (yodu) to you. Your hand [shall grasp] your enemies' neck; your father's sons will bow to you.

“A lion cub is Judah – you have risen above plunder, my son. He crouches, resting like a lion, like an awesome lion, who will rouse him?

“The scepter [of kingship] shall not depart from Judah, nor the law from his descendants, until Shiloh comes, and he will gather the nations together.”¹

In summary, Jacob tells Judah that he will rule over all his brethren, that all will submit themselves to him. And this will not only be in the times of Judah and his brothers, but in the times of his descendants who will comprise the Tribe of Judah, which will serve as kings over the other the tribes, beginning with King David (from the house of Judah), until the Messiah (Mashiach) comes, who will also stem from the family of Judah.

¹ Genesis 49:8-10.

4. Jews and Judah

Jacob's prophecy literally states that the kings of Israel will spring from the Tribe of Judah and thus all of Israel will be under its rule.

But the prophecy and blessing of Jacob have had even greater consequences, because later in history all members of the Nation of Israel came to be called Jews after Judah – in Hebrew *Yehudim* after *Yehudah*. Indeed, today, every single Jew is named after the Tribe of Judah, regardless of whether or not he or she is actually descended from that tribe.

So why is this? Why are all Jews called, well, Jews, after the Tribe of Judah, even if they are not descended from that tribe biologically speaking?

5. The Talmud's Answer

The Talmud is perhaps the most quintessential Jewish book, so what better place to look for a good Jewish answer to this question. This is what it says:

Surely from [the Tribe of] Benjamin did he [Mordechai] come. Why then is he called a Jew (*Yehudi*)? Because he denounced foreign worship, and every one who denounces foreign worship is called a Jew, as it is written [in the Book of Daniel²]: *There are Jews ...*[referring to those who refused to worship idols].³

² Daniel 3:12. The verse continues: ...whom you appointed over the affairs of the capital cities of Babylon, namely Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego; these men did not take counsel to follow your decree, O king. They do not worship your god and they do not prostrate themselves to the golden image that you have set up. Hence we see that all those who do not prostrate to falsity are called Yehudi, Jews, even if they are not of Judah's tribe.

³ Megillah 13a.

The Talmud is speaking here about Mordechai of Purim fame, who is described in the Book of Esther as *Mordechai HaYehudi*, Mordechai the Jew, even though we know that Mordechai came from the Tribe of Benjamin.

Mordechai merited to be called *Yehudi* because he refused to bow to Haman. His example reminded the rest of the Nation of Israel that we do not bow to anything or anyone other than God (as indeed was demonstrated by the heroes of the Book of Daniel). When they all followed suit, denouncing Haman's corrupt ways, they became denouncers of everything false and fake, rebels against everything ungodly and dark. And that defined them as Jews.⁴

6. The Lion of Judah

It takes tremendous courage to stand up against the prevailing mores of the dominant society, especially when one is a member of a tiny minority. And this is where the courage of a lion comes in.

But did Jacob characterize his son Judah as a lion because of his courage?

Let us look carefully at Jacob's blessing and see what it comes to teach us.

Said Jacob:

*A lion cub (gur aryeh) is Judah – you have risen above plunder, my son.
He crouches, resting like ... an awesome lion (lavi), who will rouse him?*

Note that this Torah verse is structured on tension – a lion cub (*gur aryeh*), soft and childlike, is contrasted with lion (*lavi*), awesome and ferocious. At once he is a non-threatening cub at rest and a fearsome creature whom none dare rouse.

⁴ See Torah Ohr, Megillat Esther, 91b.

7. The Contrast

We find this contrast to the lion repeated in so many references throughout Jewish literature.

For example, the lion has seven names, according to *Avot d'Rav Natan*,⁵ which describe his contrasting characteristics:

- 1) *aryeh* – cub
- 2) *ari* – seasoned/mature
- 3) *kfir* – rebellious
- 4) *layish* – dough kneader
- 5) *lavi* – awe-inspiring
- 6) *shachal* – frightening
- 7) *shachatz* – proud

The name *aryeh* alone also hints at contrast. On one hand, *aryeh* (spelled *alef, resh, yud, hei*) is made up of the same letters as *re'iah*, meaning “vision,” specifically the foresight of wisdom (*re'iat hachochma*).⁶ This requires *bittul*, that is “submission” or “humility.”⁷ On the other hand, *aryeh* has the same numerical value (*gematria*), 216, as *gevurah*, which connotes “power” or “might,” the opposite of submission or humility.⁸

This contrast is evident in nature. Anyone who has ever gone on safari, or has watched National Geographic nature shows, knows that the lion is a paradox. On one hand, he is proud (indeed, not for nothing is his social unit called a “pride”); he is ferocious, the king⁹ of the jungle,

⁵ Chapter 43, Version II. Cf. Genesis Rabbah 99:9 where it states that our verse calls Judah with four appellations.

⁶ See Tikkunei Zohar 70 (122a). Imrei Binah, Shaar HaKriyat Shma, 49a.

⁷ See Pelach Harimon, Tzav, p. 22.

⁸ The face of the Lion is also on the right side of the cosmic and mystical Merkava (Ezekial 1:10). The right side is Chesed (loving-kindness) and the left is Gevurah, (power and strength). Here too we find the contrast. See Torat Shmuel, 5627, p. 147; 5639, p. 476.

⁹ Chagigah 13b.

who exudes power and might, who elicits fear and respect as he roars and causes the entire jungle to tremble. Yet, on the other hand, the lion seems to be in a constant state of rest, lazily crouching in a pose that suggests humility and submission.

And, finally and most importantly, we see this contrast when it comes to the person of Judah himself. On one hand, Jacob characterizes Judah as the lion and the king, the powerful ruler of all the tribes. Yet, on the other hand, Judah's very name – Yehudah from the root *ho'daah* – means gratitude, humility and submission.

So what defines the Jew – the fearsome lion or a mild-mannered lion cub? Are we meant to be meek and humble, or powerful and ferocious, or both (if such a thing is possible)?

8. The Mystics Explain

The mystics explain that the contrasting nature of the Lion of Judah is not contradictory but complimentary.¹⁰

The name Yehudah (spelled *yud, hei, vov, daled, hei*) contains all the letters of the name of God (the Tetragrammaton), with an extra *daled*. The *daled* hints at the word *dal*, meaning “low” or “humble.” Even when the lion seems to be crouching down low (*dal*) the full name of God (*yud* and *hei* and *vov* and *hei*) is with him.

And this is the inner secret of Jacob's blessing to Judah, and, by extension to all Jews – *yehudim* – called after Judah, *Yehudah*.

Even when the Lion of Judah roars and is awesome, fearsome and prideful, even then he humbles himself, submitting to God, the source of his power and awesomeness. And even when the lion is crouching down low, even then the royal blood still runs through his veins, and the royal roar is heard in the letters of God's name, perpetually within him.

⁹ For the following, see Sfat Emet, Vayechi, 5652 (p. 139); 5654 (p. 278); 5656 (p. 140); 5658 (p. p. 280).

Indeed, it is humility and subjugation to God that is the source of Yehuda the lion's power.

This characteristic – stereotype if you will – is the defining DNA of the Jew, whether or not he or she stems biologically from the Tribe of Judah, and that is why we are all called Jews after Judah – *Yehudim* after *Yehudah*.

Yehudah from *ho'daah* – describes submission to the Source. It means, on one hand, acknowledging with humility that we are all lions, all kings and royalty, all awesome and awe-inspiring leaders in our respective environments and communities. But, on the other hand, it means confidently believing and securely trusting that even when we are crouching down low or lounging at rest, seemingly silent, even then we are the royal lions, proud creatures at one with our pride.

9. Personal Lessons from Lions

The lion's contrasts, the two sides of Jacob's blessing to Judah, apply to every single Jew. These are the characteristics that inspire us to rebel against everything false, to stand up against everything foreign to our purpose. And it is for this reason that we are called Jews.

Today, in our every day lives, we must always remember both sides:

- when we are roaring and awesome and ferocious, we must humbly acknowledge our source in God, our purpose and reason for being;
- when we are down, crouching low, we must remember and believe in our royalty, in our pride and purpose.

Here are some practical ways that can help us achieve these lofty goals and fulfill Jacob's blessing:

1. Build Your Pride: A lion's social unit, his family, is called a pride. We must build our respective individual prides and the collective pride of the Jewish people. This is obviously done literally, by building our families, both our biological and ideological families – birthing life and birthing ideas. But it is also done by building pride in our reason for being, in the Jewish purpose: to transform this universe into a home for the Divine. Pride is only negative if it's arrogant; pride is positive when it acknowledges its source and is used to build and illuminate.

Simply put, we must imbue our children with self-confidence and pride, brimming with confidence to take on any challenge and walk upright as kings.

2. Grow a Mane: The lion's mane is distinctive; it makes the lion stand out. All too often, we Jews want to blend into the jungle instead of standing out. Wanting to blend in comes from a place of insecurity, while growing a mane is about standing proud and tall. Figuratively speaking, this means making and leaving a mark, striving not for adequacy but for excellence and transcendence. When we strive for it, we achieve it.

3. Teach Your Cubs: The cubs of today are the lion kings of tomorrow. Anyone who has seen the film *The Lion King* or watched the musical knows this. Teach your cubs to be humble and acknowledge their source; but, perhaps even more importantly, teach them to be proud of their royal line and the power, and awesomeness that comes with it. The best way to teach it is, of course, to live it.

10. The Mane Course (Humor)

One day, a man walked into a restaurant, with a lion on a leash. After being seated, he asked the waitress, "Do you serve lawyers here?"

"Yes," the waitress replied.

"Okay, I'll take a pastrami sandwich for myself, and a lawyer for my lion."

11. Lion and Lamb (Humor)

Woody Allen famously said, “Someday the lion will lie down with the lamb but the lamb won’t get much sleep...”

But truth be told that in the time of the Final Redemption lions will no longer be eating lambs or lawyers or anyone else for that matter.

12. Lionize the World! (Conclusion)

It is our job – the job of the Lion of Judah – to get us there today.

We must lionize the world.

Like a true king, a true leader, the Lion of Judah makes the world proud to return to the nobility of its divine purpose and vision.

Long live the Lion of Judah!

Shabbat Shalom!

© Copyright 2015 The Meaningful Life Center. By downloading this PDF file from Meaningful Sermons, you agree to respect the copyright of this written material. You understand that your right to this material is limited to using it to deliver sermons, classes or other oral presentations to your community. You agree not to publish this material or any part thereof, nor to email, fax, copy, scan, mail, etc. or otherwise share this material with others, nor to verbally share these ideas with others.