Hardship and Heroism
Text Study for Parashat Miketz
December 24, 2022 / 30 Kislev 5783

Genesis 43:1-14, focus text 1-5, 8-9, 13-14

(1) But the famine in the land was severe. (2) And when they had eaten up the rations which they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, “Go again and procure some food for us.” (3) But Judah said to him, “The man warned us, ‘Do not let me see your faces unless your brother [Benjamin] is with you.’ (4) If you will let our brother go with us, we will go down and procure food for you; (5) but if you will not let him go, we will not go down, for that man said to us, ‘Do not let me see your faces unless your brother is with you.’” (6) And Israel [aka Jacob] said, “Why did you serve me so ill as to tell the man that you had another brother?” (7) They replied, “But the man kept asking about us and our family, saying, ‘Is your father still living? Have you another brother?’ And we answered him accordingly. How were we to know that he would say, ‘Bring your brother here’?” (8) Then Judah said to his father Israel, “Send the boy in my care, and let us be on our way, that we may live and not die—you and we and our children. (9) I myself will be surety for him; you may hold me responsible: if I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, I shall stand guilty before you forever. (10) For we could have been there and back twice if we had not dawdled.” (11) Then their father Israel said to them, “If it must be so, do this: take some of the choice products of the land in your baggage, and carry them down as a gift for the man—some balm and some honey, gum, ladanum, pistachio nuts, and almonds. (12) And take with you double the money, carrying back with you the money that was replaced in the mouths of your bags; perhaps it was a mistake. (13) Take your brother [Benjamin] too; and go back at once to the man. (14) And may El Shaddai dispose the man to mercy toward you, that he may release to you your other brother [Simeon], as well as Benjamin. As for me, if I am to be bereaved, I shall be bereaved.”

― To what extent do you think the hardships Judah endured prepared him to lead in this scene? 
― In general, what do you think is needed for a person to emerge from a hardship with greater resilience, strength, and/or empathy?

“Judith and the Hanukkah Story” by Jewish Women’s Archive

In the second century B.C.E., as the powerful Assyrian army invaded the Near East, the town of Bethulia was besieged by the cruel and domineering Holofernes, the Assyrian emperor...
Nebuchadnezzar’s top general. If Bethulia fell, the whole country would come under Assyrian control. Discouraged, [and threatened with starvation] the city's elders agreed to surrender if they were not rescued within a few days. Judith, a young widow and most unlikely savior, challenged them to take responsibility for the survival of their famine-stricken community. Accompanied only by her maid, she set out for the enemy camp. Smitten with her beauty, Holofernes invited her to a banquet. When he fell asleep in a drunken stupor, they were left alone in his tent. After praying for God’s help, Judith took his sword and decapitated him. With the Assyrian army thrown into confusion, she urged the Israelites to launch a surprise attack; they emerged victorious.

- How do you imagine Judith’s experience as a young widow influenced her outlook and actions?
- Have you ever gone through a hardship and found yourself different on the other side (different from how you used to be, or different from others around you)?

"Bring Me Liberty or Bring Me A Dress” by Sue Schmidt, The Moth (edited and abbreviated)

The first sentence I ever learned in Italian was sìpregei de portale liberta which means “please bring to me liberty,” or in my great-grandmother’s case, “bail money.” My great-grandmother was and Italian immigrant who came to this country and became a garment worker in New York City, and she had been arrested so many times fighting with the suffragettes that this was the sentence her daughter most remembered about her. My great-grandmother died the year that I was born, and so I don’t remember much about her at all, with the exception of this one picture of her wading in the waters off Coney Island in this long black dress pulled up and tied between her legs because she couldn’t afford a bathing suit.

In the summer of 1972, I had to pick an instrument and I decided I wanted to be a drummer. And so that fall, I joined a drum line, me and nine boys. Title 9 had just passed, so women were showing up everywhere and boys were pissed! In spite of everything the boys did, they stole my sheet music, they would take my drumsticks, I persevered. And so, when it came time for the winter concert, the band master picked me to play the drum set! My parents were so proud that my mother bought me this long green velvet flowing gown. So, I get on stage, and then I realize somewhere between the Hanukkah medley and Frosty the Snowman that a long velvet gown is not the best thing to wear for the drum set.

I’m not quite sure how I am going to get into position for the drum set in this long gown, but I look out at my family, and I see my grandmother is so proud she’s crying. And I know in that moment what I need to do. I stride up to the corner of that stage and I reach down, and I pull that dress up between my legs and I tie that frickin’ thing off at the waist and I sit down at the drum set and I frickin’ rocked that thing!

When I come off stage, my grandmother hugs me and she says, “Your great-grandmother is here with you tonight, and she is so proud.” I fell asleep that night with that feeling when you’ve worked really hard for something you’ve been able to achieve and I realized, I don’t think my great-grandmother meant “bail money,” I think she meant “liberty.” I think she meant the right for women to vote, I think she meant the right for us to show our legs at Coney Island without being harassed, and I think she meant the hope that comes when you work really hard for something, even if you don’t get to achieve it, one day maybe your daughter or your granddaughter or your great-granddaughter will get to be up on stage, and they will just get to rock that frickin’ thing!

- Whether as part of the Jewish people, of another resilient community, or of your family line, how do you draw inspiration from the past to face hardships today?