

How many times in life have you wished you could go back to a moment you regret and do things differently? The ancient rabbis teach us that if you want to know if a sinner has really repented from doing evil, put them in the same situation as before and see if this time they do the right thing. But as we move downstream along the river of time, we never really get a chance to go back and revisit a lost experience. The best we can hope for is the intention to choose the correct path if we ever find ourselves in similar circumstances. Until we are presented with the same situation, we may never know if our repentance is real. It is a staple of TV detective work that the suspect always comes back to the scene of the crime. In real life, we tend to do the opposite. Instead of repeating the encounter we fouled up the first time, we are more likely to avoid that place where we failed to live up to our own values and the standards of others. Shame for what we did steers us away from people we wronged, and far from anyone who might stand as our accuser.

So it is rare to find ourselves face to face with the exact

same temptation twice. That's good – it may indicate we are not repeat offenders. We make a big mistake, realize it's a big mistake, and never even get close to making the same mistake again. That's usually enough to keep society running peacefully. But what about those mistakes we made that we believe we got away with? As the years pass, we think less and less about what we did, until we all but pretend it never happened. That's not repentance – that's denial. In such a case, the only thing that can shock us into admitting our past failure is going through it all over again. No story dramatizes this truth more powerfully than the multi-week, multi-chapter reading of the Biblical story of Joseph. Joseph is the favorite of Jacob's 12 children, because Joseph's mother Rachel was the favorite of Jacob's four wives. The coat of many colors Jacob gives his darling son is just the most visible symbol of his preference. Add to that the egotistical dreams Joseph tells to his brothers, and it's no surprise they all hate him. One fine day, they strip him of his splendid coat and throw him into a pit. That's as far as the conspirators' plan has taken them. While they are

debating whether to leave him there to die, or to sell him instead into slavery, fate decides the matter for them. A caravan of traders find Joseph in the pit and enslave him. The Torah leaves us with the impression that they themselves did nothing to hurt the boy. Nor did they lift a finger to help him. They let their father presume his favorite son is dead, and then carry on for years as if Joseph had indeed been mauled by a wild beast. Their lie becomes a fact of life, and the farther it recedes into the past, the more true it seems. Joseph is forgotten, and with him any chance to repent, to make matters right, to admit to their sin, to come clean to their father.

When famine brings the brothers to Egypt to buy food, Joseph recognizes them, without giving away his own identity. A complex scheme unfolds, culminating in a dramatic moment so similar to the time Joseph was left in the pit that even the morally deficient brothers of Joseph can't miss it. This time the favorite son is Benjamin, still the youngest, the second child of the favored wife Rachel. Benjamin is found with stolen property – a frame-up to be

sure, but an iron-clad accusation that certainly will result in slavery or imprisonment. If the brothers do is nothing, their pesky little brother will be out of their hair forever, as they presumed Joseph was. Just to drive that point home, the unrecognized Joseph says to them, “Only he who stole the cup must remain under arrest. The rest of you are free to go.”

The brothers are truly free to go. They have done nothing wrong, and their families are waiting for them to bring home the much-needed food. What can they do for the accused Benjamin? If they left without him, we could understand. But something has changed since they abandoned Joseph to his fate. They experienced the utter anguish their father Jacob went through over his lost son. They are no longer the same insensitive brutes who left their father’s favorite son in a pit. However they may feel about Benjamin, they are determined never to put their father through such pain again.

Thus the scene is set for this week’s Torah portion, and now we understand the power of Judah’s plea to Joseph. He

begs him, “Let me please remain as your slave instead of the boy, and let the boy go back with his brothers, for how can I go back to my father unless the boy is with me? I cannot bear to witness the pain that would bring my father.”

You can search far and wide, but that’s as fine an example of repentance as you’ll find anywhere. Fate and luck and famine and Joseph and God conspired to let Judah experience exactly the same test he faced earlier in his life as a younger man. With Joseph he failed miserably. With Benjamin he showed a hard-won moral righteousness that makes Judah a worthy namesake for the Judaic heritage of righteousness to this very day. Joseph got the message. He was so touched by Judah’s transformation that he at last revealed himself to his brothers. They were stunned silent, literally dumbstruck, as he recounted to them the amazing path his life had followed. And then, amid some hugs and plenty of tears, they at last found their voices, and a family was finally healed. Jacob learns that Joseph is alive, and by now our eyes are watering up as well. Then Jacob and Joseph embraced and wept for a good long while. Jacob

comes up for air, saying, “Now I can die, seeing for myself that you are still alive!”

Fortunately, Jacob doesn't die, at least not yet. He still has time to hear the apologies of his ten older sons, and to find it in his heart to forgive them. That's the lasting gift that repentance offers: a priceless opportunity to make things right, while there is still time. I'm not implying that the mess ups and missteps of our lives measure up to the criminal acts of Judah and company, but they are sufficiently important to warrant our addressing them.

Great is repentance, say our rabbis, Great is repentance, for it brings healing to the world. We all could use some healing, and we all have the opportunity to offer it. It's the second chance that makes human life possible. So whether you are a Jacob or a Judah, a Joseph or a Benjamin, every one of us has buried some unfinished business we would do well to revisit. The extravagant story of Joseph promises us that we can, and we should, and that if we do, it will be well worth it.