

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

One of the most fundamental questions about the Torah turns out to be one of the hardest to answer. What, from the call of God to Abraham in Genesis 12 to the death of Joseph in Genesis 50, is the basic religious principle being taught? What does the entire set of stories about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their wives, together with Jacob's sons and daughter, actually tell us? Abraham brought monotheism to a world that had forgotten it, but where do we see this in the actual text of the Torah itself?

Here is the problem. The first eleven chapters of Genesis teach us many fundamentals of faith: that God brought the universe into being and declared it good; that God made the human person in His image; that God gave us freedom and thus the ability to do not only good but also bad; that the good is rewarded, the bad punished and that we are morally responsible for our actions. Chapters 8 and 9 also tell us that God made a covenant with Noah and through him with all humanity.

It is equally easy to say what the rest of the Torah, from Exodus to Deuteronomy, teach us: that God rescued the Israelites from slavery, setting them on the road to freedom and the Promised Land; that God made a covenant with the people as a whole on Mount Sinai, with its 613 commands and its purpose, to establish Israel as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. In short, Genesis 1-11 is about creation. Exodus to Deuteronomy is about revelation and redemption. But what are Genesis 12-50 about?

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all recognise God. But so do non-Jews like Malkizedek, Abraham's contemporary, described as "priest of God most high" (14:18). So even does the Pharaoh of Joseph's day, who says about him, 'Can there be another person who has God's spirit in him as this man does?' (41:38). God speaks to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but He does likewise to Avimelech king of Gerar (Gen. 20:3-7), and to Laban (31:24). So what is special about the patriarchs?

They seem to teach no new principle of faith. Other than childbirth and rescue from danger, God performs no world-transforming miracles through them. They deliver no prophecies to the people of their generation. Other than an ambiguous hint when the Torah says that Abraham took with him on his journey "the souls they had gathered" (12:5), which may refer to

converts they had made, but may equally merely refer to their servants, they attracted no disciples. There is nothing explicit in the text that says they sought to persuade people of the truth of monotheism or that they did battle against idolatry. At most there is a story about how Rachel stole her father's teraphim (31:19) which may or may not have been idols.

To be sure, a persistent theme of the patriarchal stories is the two promises God made to each of them, [1] that they would have many descendants and [2] they would inherit the land of Canaan. But God also makes promises to Ishmael and Esau, and the Torah seems to go out of its way to tell us that these promises were fulfilled for them before they were fulfilled for the children of the covenant (see Gen. 25:12-18 for the account of Ishmael's children, and Gen. 36 for those of Esau). About Esau's children, for example, it says, "These are the kings who ruled in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the Israelites" (36:31).

So the question is real and puzzling. What was different about the patriarchs? What new did they bring to the world? What difference did monotheism make in their day?

There is an answer but it is an unexpected one. One theme appears no less than six (possibly even seven) times. Whenever a member of the covenantal family leaves his or her own space and enters the wider world of their contemporaries, they encounter a world of sexual free-for-all.

Three times, Abraham (Gen. 12 and 20) and Isaac (Gen. 26) are forced to leave home because of famine. Twice they go to Gerar. Once Abraham goes to Egypt. On all three occasions the husband fears he will be killed so that the local ruler can take his wife into his harem. All three times they put forward the story that their wife is actually their sister. At worst this is a lie, at best a half-truth. In all three cases the local ruler (Pharaoh, Avimelech), protests at their behaviour when the truth becomes known. Clearly the fear of death was real or the patriarchs would not have been party to deception.

In the fourth case, Lot in Sodom (Gen. 19), the people cluster round Lot's house demanding that he bring out his two visitors so that they can be raped. Lot offers them his virgin daughters instead. Only swift action by the visitors – angels – who smite the people with blindness, saves Lot and his family from violence.

In the fifth case (Gen. 34), Shechem, a local

prince, rapes and abducts Dina when she “went out to visit some of the local girls.” He holds her hostage, causing Shimon and Levi to practise deception and bloodshed in the course of rescuing her.

Then comes a marginal case (Gen. 38), the story of Judah and Tamar, more complex than the others and not part of the overall pattern. Finally there is the sixth episode, in this week’s parsha, when Potiphar’s wife attempts to seduce Joseph. Failing, she accuses him of rape and has him imprisoned.

In other words, there is a continuing theme in Genesis 12-50, a contrast between the people of the Abrahamic covenant and their neighbours, but it is not about idolatry, but rather about adultery, promiscuity, sexual license, seduction, rape and sexually motivated violence.

The patriarchal narrative is surprisingly close to the view of Freud, that eros is one of the two primal drives governing human behaviour (the other is thanatos, the death instinct), and the view of at least one evolutionary psychologist (David Buss, in his books *The Evolution of Desire* and *The Murderer Next Door*) that sex is the main cause of violence amongst humans.

This gives us an entirely new way of thinking about Abrahamic faith. *Eemunah*, the Hebrew word normally translated as faith, does not mean what it is taken to mean in English: a body of dogma, a set of principles, or a cluster of beliefs often held on non-rational grounds. *Eemunah* means faithfulness, loyalty, fidelity, honouring your commitments, doing what you said you would do and acting in such a way as to inspire trust. It has to do with relationships, first and foremost with marriage.

Sex belongs, for the Torah, within the context of marriage, and it is marriage that comes closest to the deep resonances of the biblical idea of covenant. A covenant is a mutual act of commitment in which two persons, honouring their differences, each respecting the dignity of the other, come together in a bond of love to join their destinies and chart a future together. When the prophets want to speak of the covenantal relationship between God and His people, they constantly use the metaphor of marriage.

The God of Abraham is the God of love and trust who does not impose His will by force or violence, but speaks gently to us, inviting an answering response of love and trust. Genesis’ argument against idolatry – all the more impressive for being told obliquely, through a series of stories and vignettes – is that it leads to a world in which the combination of unchecked sexual desire, the absence of a code of moral self-restraint, and the worship of power, leads eventually to violence and abuse.

That domestic violence and abuse still exist today, even among religious Jews, is a disgrace and source of shame. Against this stands the testimony of Genesis that faithfulness to God means and demands

faithfulness to our marriage partners. Faith – whether between us and God or between us and our fellow humans – means love, loyalty and the circumcision of desire.

What the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs tell us is that faith is not proto- or pseudo-science, an explanation of why the natural universe is as it is. It is the language of relationships and the choreography of love. It is about the importance of the moral bond, in particular as it affects our most intimate relations. Sexuality matters to Judaism, not because it is puritanical but because it represents the love that brings new life into the world.

When a society loses faith, eventually it loses the very idea of a sexual ethic, and the result in the long term is violence and the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful. Women suffer. Children suffer. There is a breakdown of trust where it matters most. So it was in the days of the patriarchs. Sadly, so it is today. Judaism, by contrast, is the sanctification of relationship, the love between husband and wife which is as close as we will ever get to understanding God’s love for us. *Covenant and Conversation* is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt”l © 2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd Judah said unto his brethren: What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood?” (Genesis 37:26) A Jew’s identity – at least as far as the word Jew itself is concerned – is related specifically to descendants from the tribe of Judah. The other ten tribes, led off into captivity, were lost to history. Thus, the vast majority of Jews in the world owe their very existence to one tribe, Judah. The others who survived come from the tribe of Levi; these are fewer in number, and they – the regular Levites and the more elevated sons of Aaron, the kohen-priests – ministered in the Holy Temple, and retained their special lineage to this very day.

The mere fact that a person can still call himself a Jew 3,500 years after Sinai and despite close to 2,000 years without our own homeland, is no small miracle. He/she is one of the rare ones, a delicate and miraculous survivor sustained and nurtured and kept alive despite exile, wars, pogroms, and assimilation. To understand what it is that allows a Jew to survive despite all the forces against him, we ought to turn to the founder of this particular line, Judah himself.

What special traits did he possess which were absent from his brothers? Apparently, father Jacob-Israel identified his uniqueness as well, having granted him – and not his first-born brother Reuven – the gift and birthright of messianic majesty: ‘the scepter shall not depart from Judah...and unto him will gather the community of nations’ [Gen. 49:10]. We still pray every

day for a ruler in Jerusalem from the House of David – a descendant of Judah!

What serves to especially sharpen our query is the fact that – at the moment of truth, when an angry and jealous mob of brothers cast the hapless favorite son Joseph into a pit (according to the Midrash, filled with snakes and scorpions) – Reuven and Judah each react, with Reuven's words appearing to be the more courageous and edifying. It turns out that Reuven steps into his role as first-born and acts accordingly, as he attempts to abort the brothers' evil design: 'Let us not kill him...Shed no blood...Cast him into this pit...but lay no hand upon him...' [Gen. 37:21]. His plan, as the text seems to tell us and which Rashi confirms, is that Reuven's intention was to return to the pit afterwards and to personally restore Joseph to their father.

Reuven, however, never gets the chance to execute his possible rescue. The text records that Judah sights a caravan of Ishmaelite traders in the distance, and suggests to his brothers that there is no point to murdering Joseph when they could just as easily earn money from his sale: "What profit [mah betzah] is it if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood? Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother and our flesh...." (Genesis 37:26)

Judah's proposal is accepted, and Joseph joins the caravan as a slave in tow, the silver that his head brought now in the pockets of the brothers. We then read how Reuven returns, finds an empty pit, 'and rent his garments' [Gen. 37:29]. His despair is deep and painful: "The child is not and I, whither shall I go?" And now the others have no choice but to invent a story about animals having torn apart their brother Joseph – for how can they possibly admit to their father that they sold his beloved son into slavery?

If we compare the responses of Reuven and Judah, the heroic one seems to be the response of Reuven. He risks his brothers' wrath when he initially stops them from carrying out an act of murder, and devises an alternative plan which, albeit dangerous, might allow him to bring about a rescue.

Judah, on the other hand, is crass and commercial, turning it all into a question of profit. He speaks like an opportunist, a cool businessman. He sees a good deal, a group of traders in the distance and so convinces the brothers to get rid of their nemesis and enjoy a material advantage at the same time. In this light his concluding words "for he is our brother and our flesh" sound hypocritical. If Judah indeed harbored fraternal feelings for Joseph, how could he subject him to the abject slave conditions and to the thousand gods of Egypt?!

Nevertheless, Jacob chooses Judah as the recipient of the birthright, rejecting Reuven: "...unstable as water, you will no longer be first..." (Genesis 49:4). Thus our question is, why Judah, and not Reuven? Why

are we called Jews and not Reuvs?

Let's examine Judah from two perspectives. One way of interpreting the text is that Judah was wrong by citing the profit motive, and had the blessings of Jacob been given the following week, Reuven, and not Judah, would probably have received the birthright. But Judah's life didn't end at the side of the pit. He continued to grow and evolve. He is the archetypal ba'al-teshuva, the classic penitent. When he impregnates his daughter-in-law Tamar, we see the greatness of a person able to admit his mistake, despite the personal risk and shame involved in revealing his guilt. Indeed, he says publicly, "She is more righteous than I" (Genesis 38:26).

And when we follow Judah's development to the point when he offers himself as a slave to the Grand Vizier of Egypt in exchange for Benjamin's release into the arms of their aged father, we see just how far a distance Judah has travelled. Jacob's words regarding his fourth son, "...from the prey, my son, you have gone up..." (Genesis 49:9) confirms the ascent of Judah from jealous veniality to altruistic heroism. And perhaps it is just this ability to pick oneself off the ground and raise one's head up high, to redeem one's past, to recreate one's life, not to be victimized by fate but to rise above it, which made Judah the most worthy namesake for his Jewish descendants.

But there is also a second way to view Judah: perhaps he is not so much a penitent as practitioner, a shrewd realist who understands the art of compromise. As far as Judah is concerned, leaving Joseph inside the pit (especially if it was really filled with snakes and scorpions) was tantamount to leaving him to die a cruel death. When Judah saw the Ishmaelites in the distance, he seized the opportunity to save his brother.

In order to be heard by his angry and jealous brothers, he understood that he had to conceal his pure-hearted motivations under the guise of a profit-making venture. Although he realizes that sending Joseph off to Egypt poses an obvious danger, it is a paltry risk when compared to the certainty of death by starvation in the pit. Reuven may have had the best intentions for Joseph, but intentions alone are not enough. "Let us not kill him," Reuven declared, but his words fell on deaf ears. Judah, on the other hand, understood that his brothers had murder in their hearts and therefore he couched his plea in accordance with the politicians' 'art of the possible'. It is for this reason that he used a word which would be likely to strike a responsive chord in his brothers' hearts: betzah – profit, money, cash. His goal was to do whatever it took to divert their passion for blood.

Since Judah was effective in his very first test of leadership, as an individual who was able to sway nine very angry men away from their intention to murder, it is Judah who becomes worthy of receiving the birthright from Jacob-Israel.

These opposite interpretations of Judah at the pit are echoed in a later Talmudic debate surrounding

the attitude of our sages towards arbitration and compromise, using a cognate term for compromise – botzea – which is derived from betza (profit). R. Meir insists that it is forbidden to compromise or arbitrate, that the law must express absolute purity. Indeed, he who blesses the compromiser – Judah, who used the word betza – is to be scorned by God (Psalms 10:3). Moreover, R. Eliezer asks: “If one stole a measure of wheat, ground and baked it and then performs the ritual act of separating the Challa, what blessing does he make?” And the answer he gives is that in such a situation the individual crass enough to make a blessing on stolen goods is to be scorned by God. And he, too, cites the aforementioned verse from the Psalms, giving it a slightly different twist: “the one who steals (botzea) and blesses is to be scorned by God” (Sanhedrin 6b).

Clearly, these sages are telling us that Judah’s statements in our Torah portions are duplicitous, a comparison being made between his ignoble speech to his brothers and a man pronouncing a blessing over stolen cake. How can Judah have declared “he is our brother, our flesh” and then turn around and sell his ‘brother’ to the highest bidder! Judah the crook is attempting to whitewash his crime with a blessing! Whoever praises the one who said ‘betzah – profit’ is to be scorned by God!

But the final word in the Talmud is not given to this opinion. We go on to learn R. Judah b. Korcha’s definitive statement, “Settlement by arbitration is a meritorious act... [mitzvah livtzoah].” Hence there is also a second way to view Judah’s actions, from the lens of the sage who honors arbitration and compromise. This implies that Judah had to compromise in order to save Joseph’s life, and so he must be praised for his wisdom. We even find halakhic decisors taking two views regarding the question of making a blessing over ‘forbidden’ food. Maimonides rules that whoever eats forbidden food should not make a blessing, neither before nor after the meal (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Blessings, 1:19).

This ruling would be in line with the idea that a hypocrite should be scorned, that Jewish law must be followed in an absolute fashion. But the Ra’avad rules differently, distinguishing between a blessing made over a ritual performance (birkat hamitzva) and a blessing made because of the intrinsic pleasure one derives from a particular object (birkat hanehenin). The Ra’avad would agree that it is forbidden – and hypocritically foolish – to attempt to perform a ritual act for God with an object acquired by devious methods; the individual who makes the blessing of having performed God’s commandment over such an object is in reality blaspheming God! He does not do a mitzvah but a mockery! But an individual who derives enjoyment from a cheeseburger, for example, ought at least thank the Almighty for his pleasure, even though Jewish law forbade him from eating the cheeseburger in the first

place!

I remember how, many years ago, a fourteen-year-old girl at a youth seminar told me that she was the opposite of most Jews she knew: in those days many Jews kept kosher at home and ate non-kosher food on the outside (at least their dishes would go to heaven!). However, she ate only strictly kosher outside the home, but had to make certain compromises when she ate at her parents, who were not willing to keep a kosher kitchen. I ruled that she ought to make the proper blessings even when eating at home, using the Ra’avad as an indisputable source for my decision. Today this young girl has grown into one of the most effective rebbetzins in North America.

The truth is that you have to do the best you can, and a half a loaf is better than none. ‘All or nothing’ may be the ideal in a perfect world, but it hardly applies for us today. Why does Judah become the leader of the brothers and then the leading tribe of the nation? Penitence and compromise, the ability to rise after a fall and to realize that striving only for the absolute may well prevent one from being very good, albeit not quite perfect. © 2024 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Yosef feels the brothers have been unjust for rejecting his dreams immediately and they in turn are convinced that he and his dreaming constitute a veritable danger to the unity and survival of Yaakov’s family. It is not only the contents of Yosef’s dreams – that he will dominate the family – that disturb the brothers. It is the very fact that he is dreaming that raises their suspicions and fuels their enmity towards him.

In the struggle between Yosef and the brothers, the conflict is between the lofty and inspirational theory of Judaism and its sometime mundane practice of hope and actual reality-of what can be achieved even though it is not exactly what one dreamt of achieving. The conflict between Yosef and his brothers is never really ended. It is compromised by both sides, recognizing the validity of the position of the other and living with that reality. The Jewish people in its long and difficult history have somehow been able to combine the spirit and dreams of Yosef with the hardheaded realism of his brothers. Both traits are necessary for our survival and accomplishments, both as individuals and as a nation. Someone without dreams and ambition, who refuses to reach heavenward and conquer the stars, will never be a truly creative or original person.

But if this drive is not tempered by a realistic sense of the situation and the society that surrounds us, then all dreams are doomed to eventually disappoint. Yosef’s dreams are realized only after he has been severely chastened by his brothers’ enmity, slavery and imprisonment in Egypt. Even after he seemingly has them in his grasp, it is still a contest of wills. Again,

Yosef's dreams are finally realized but only after he has been subjected to many hard years of unpleasant reality. The brothers, realists to the end, are shocked to see that the dreamer has emerged triumphant. The dreamers save the world from famine while the realists end up being its customers. Thus, the Torah teaches us that we need both dreamers and realists within our ranks. A nation built exclusively on dreams, without practical reality intruding, will find that reality rising to foil the realization of the dream.

A nation that ceases to dream of reaching greater heights will stagnate and not survive. So, both the brothers and Yosef are "right" in their pursuit of building a nation and of spiritual growth. We need a healthy dose of both values and views in our Jewish world today as well. ©2024 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The dreams of the sar hamashkim (butler) and sar ha'ofim (baker) seem quite similar. Each of their dreams contains food (grapes, bread), the relinquishing of the food (grapes to Pharaoh, bread eaten by the birds), and the number three (three branches, three baskets; Genesis 40:9–11, 16–17).

Since the dreams were so similar, what prompted Joseph to offer such divergent interpretations? The butler, Joseph proclaimed, would be restored to his post while the baker would be hanged (40:13, 19).

The normative approach to these differing predictions is that Joseph's interpretation was divinely inspired. God Himself planted this understanding in Joseph's mind. Alternatively, his insight was the product of his knowledge of the inner workings of Pharaoh's palace and its personnel. Joseph knew who the workers were and how they were viewed by Pharaoh, interpreting their dreams accordingly.

However, says Benno Jacob, quoted by Nehama Leibowitz, a closer look at the text indicates that there was in fact a fundamental difference between the dreams. The butler describes himself as being active – "I took the grapes, pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and placed the cup into Pharaoh's hand" (40:11). Here, there is a preponderance of verbs.

The baker, on the other hand, was completely passive. Three baskets were on my head, he said, and the birds were eating from the baked goods (40:17). Here, there are no verbs descriptive of what the baker did in his dream.

Dreams reveal much about character. In fact, they often express one's deepest subconscious feelings. The butler's dreams showed he was a doer, a person of action. Observing this phenomenon, Joseph concluded

that the butler was worthy of returning to Pharaoh's palace.

By contrast, the baker's dream reveals him as a man who is sitting back and doing nothing. Therefore, Joseph concluded, he was unworthy of a reprieve.

A parable helps to illustrate this point: An artist was selling a picture of a person with bread on his head. As the potential buyer negotiated the price, birds flew down and began to peck at the food. "This piece is so good," the artist said, "the birds believe the baked goods to be real." Replied the buyer: "The birds may believe the bread is real, but clearly they do not believe the person you've drawn is alive – or they would have been frightened away." The baker is like the person in this painting. Sitting still as the birds ate bread from atop his head, he appeared unreal, a simulacrum.

Not coincidentally, Parashat Vayeshev, where this narrative appears, is always read on Chanukah or on the Shabbat before Chanukah – the holiday celebrating the pure, one-day cruse of oil that lasted eight days. One wonders, if there was enough oil for the first day, why not celebrate seven days – the amount of time the miracle lasted? Perhaps the miracle of the first day was that the Maccabees – knowing they needed eight days to retrieve pure oil – didn't give up. They lit the candelabra with the oil they had. They did, they acted, much like the butler in the Vayeshev story.

The lesson of the divergent dreams is that good things invariably result from action. Doom and disaster can result from inaction. As the philosopher Dr. Morris Cohen is purported to have said, "There's nothing wrong with trying and failing, but there is something wrong with failing to try." ©2024 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Embarrassing Someone

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Our Sages derive from Parshat Vayeshev the principle of "It is better for someone to be thrown into a fiery furnace than to embarrass another person in public." For we see that Tamar refused to announce that Yehudah was the one who got her pregnant, for fear of embarrassing him, even though as a result of her silence she was taking the risk of being put to death.

It would seem that this is an example of a case in which a person should give up his life rather than transgress. True, we normally assume that there are only three sins in this category: sexual immorality, murder, and idol worship. However, it is possible that the prohibition of humiliating someone is a subset of the prohibition of murder. This is because when a person is mortified, his face turns white when the blood drains from it, just as in death.

Others disagree, explaining that the three cardinal sins are limited to those mentioned explicitly in the Torah. The prohibition to embarrass someone is not explicit. Furthermore, the Meiri explains that the principle of “It is better for someone to be thrown into a fiery furnace than to embarrass another person in public” is not meant to be taken literally. It is stated dramatically to ensure that people will take it seriously, making efforts to be sensitive to the feelings of others.

May people embarrass themselves? If we take literally the comparison between embarrassing and murdering, then just as people may not harm themselves intentionally, so too they should be forbidden to embarrass themselves intentionally. This would mean that a person would not be allowed to wear torn clothes that expose a deformed part of his body, even if he is doing so in order to make money. However, the Meiri allows a person to embarrass himself, consistent with his understanding the comparison as ethical and not literal.

In order to avoid embarrassing people, our Sages ordained that all first fruits (*bikurim*) that are brought to Jerusalem should be in baskets of reeds. This was to prevent the rich from using gold and silver baskets, which would make the poor feel embarrassed of their more humble baskets. There is also a custom in many congregations that a designated Torah reader (*ba'al korei*) does all the reading from the Torah. This ensures that someone who is unable to read from the Torah will not be embarrassed by being expected to do so. However, there are other congregations that do not share this concern. On the contrary, they believe that the fear of embarrassment will motivate all the men in the congregation to learn to read the Torah for themselves. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Chamberlains & Yosef

Yosef's story is a roller coaster ride of ups and downs. He was the son who devoted the most time for learning Torah with his father, Ya'akov. He was given a coat which symbolized leadership, even though he was not the designated future leader. His brothers were jealous of him and sold him as a slave to Egypt where he was bought by Paraoth's butcher, Potifar. Yosef rose to take charge of Potifar's household, but when Potifar's wife tried to seduce him and he refused, she told her husband that he had attacked her. His fortunes changed again and he was thrown into prison. There the warden placed him in charge of the other prisoners. At that time, Paraoth's cupbearer and his baker were also placed into prison.

The Torah tells us the story: “And it happened after these things, that the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and the baker transgressed against their master, against the king of Egypt. Paraoth was enraged at his two courtiers, the chamberlain of the cupbearers and the chamberlain of the bakers. And he placed them in the

ward of the house of the chamberlain of the butchers, into the prison, the place where Yosef was confined. The chamberlain of the butchers appointed Yosef with them, and he attended them, and they were in the ward for [a period of] days. The two of them dreamt a dream, each one had his dream on the same night, each one according to the interpretation of his dream – the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt who were confined in the prison.” They were not able to find someone to interpret their dream.

“And (Yosef) asked Paraoth's courtiers who were with him in the prison of his master's house, saying ‘Why are your faces downcast today?’” The cupbearer began: “In my dream – behold (!), there was a grapevine in front of me! On the grapevine were three tendrils; and it was as though it was blossoming – its developing fruit came forth, its clusters ripened into grapes. And Paraoth's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes, pressed them into Paraoth's cup, and I placed the cup on Paraoth's palm.” Yosef explained that in three days he would be reinstated as Paraoth's cupbearer. Yosef then asked for his help to tell Paraoth his own plight and free him from prison. The baker then offered his dream. “I, too, in my dream – behold, three wicker baskets were on my head. And in the uppermost basket were all kinds of Paraoth's food – baker's work – and the birds were eating them from the basket above my head.” Yosef explained that in three days he would be hung and the birds would eat his flesh.

Several questions arise: Why was Yosef sold into the house of the very man who controlled the king's prison for capital offenses? Why should Yosef rise to become an important and noticeable person in that household, so noticeable that this man's wife saw him regularly and desired him? Why did the man not kill Yosef when it appeared that Yosef had seduced his wife? And why was Yosef assigned to serve them while in the king's prison? Rashi interprets “a period of days” as twelve months, as he had on other occasions. That would have made their sin occur on Paraoth's birthday. That explains why the sin that each did (a fly in his cup and a stone in his bread) was significant enough to warrant a death penalty. The Ramban asks how a common servant/slave should have the audacity to speak to such exalted men, each who could have had him put to death even though they were prisoners. “Had the lord of the bakers been saved and restored to his position by the king, he would have hung him (Yosef) for his false interpretation. The Ohr HaChaim explains that the Torah did not need to give us the information that the two chamberlains were “with (Yosef) in the prison” and that they were in “his master's house.” He explains that Yosef knew that it was inappropriate for a servant to ask about the thoughts of courtiers, yet he was compelled to do so because they were downtrodden. The Ohr HaChaim gives two reasons why Yosef spoke up: (1) since they were “with him,” he understood that they were

suffering, and (2) that since they were in prison with him, they were all equally called “prisoners,” none with a greater status than another. The Or HaChaim explains that the Torah told us that they were in “his master’s house,” and since Yosef already knew that Potifar trusted his judgment, that advantage might be enable him to help these two chamberlains.

The Kli Yakar presents an interesting Midrash dealing with the cupbearer’s dream and its interpretation. The word “kos, cup” is used four times in the telling of the dream and the interpretation. Our Rabbis learn from this that there must be four cups of wine at the Pesach Seder. The obvious question is what is the relationship between the dream of the cupbearer and Pesach? The drinking of wine from the cup is a celebration of being saved from troubled times, as it says, “kos yeshuot esa, I will raise the cup of redemption.” In Sefer Yirmiyahu, there is a list of four types of suffering in increasing order: (1) the sword, (2) death, (3) hunger, and (4) captivity. One who has gone out from captivity, it is as if he was freed from all four. The Rabbis have expressed that one who has been freed from captivity is required to drink four cups of wine. The cupbearer’s dream indicated that he would be freed from captivity, and that is the reason that the Torah used the word “kos, cup” four times when dealing with his dream.

HaRav Sorotzkin reports that the baker began retelling his dream with the words, “Af, ani b’chalomi,” which is translated as “I, too, in my dream” or “Even I, in my dream.” In this translation, the word “af,” comes from “afilu,” which means “even.” A famous translation, Targum Yonatan, uses a different meaning of “af” to indicate “charon af,” or anger. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the baker was upset with Yosef for interrupting by asking the cupbearer to speak to Paraoh on his behalf. Unlike the cupbearer, the baker believed that Yosef had too much “chutzpah” to request anything from the king. The baker even accused Yosef of chutzpah for daring to speak his own request when an important chamberlain was waiting to have his dream interpreted. This arrogance on the part of the baker, indicated that his year in prison had not changed his attitude. Perhaps that is why Hashem chose to punish him further with death.

The entire story of Yosef is a study in Hashem’s rule of the world. The fact that Yosef, at this point in his life, should be in a prison and speaking as a slave to two of the most important men in Paraoh’s household, is extremely difficult to comprehend. Were we not already familiar with the story, we would assume that there were too many coincidences to make this story credible. But that is precisely how Hashem works. We are never privy to Hashem’s plan for us, but we must assume that our successes and our failures, our joys and our sorrows, literally everything that happens to us, whether we view it as good or bad at the time, is part of Hashem’s plan to benefit us and make us stronger. May we have the Faith to realize that. ©2024 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

“They took him and they cast him into the pit; and the pit was empty, it had no water in it.” (Beraishis 37:24) Rashi, quotes the Midrash, that though there was no water in it (as throwing Yosef into a pit of water would have been an act of murder) it did have snakes and scorpions in it. But if they were not trying to actively murder him, why would they throw him into a pit with these venomous creatures?

The simple answer is that though they were able to tell the pit had no water in it, perhaps by dropping a stone and listening for a splash, they could not see the bottom of the pit and therefore did not know the snakes and scorpions were in it. This is supported by the Gemara in Shabbos (22a).

There, R’ Noson bar Manyumi in the name of R’ Tanchum offers two expositions. The first is that a Chanuka lamp which is place higher than 20 cubits from the ground, is invalid, and the eye does not generally see thing so high up. The second is what we have just quoted, that the pit into which Yosef was thrown did not have water but did have snakes.

The correlation between the two is that the pit would have been at least 20 cubits deep, and then, again, the eye wouldn’t be able to see what was down there. Just as too high is unseen, so is too low. What is especially interesting, though, is that this verse gives us a hint in the Torah to the holiday of Chanuka, and the miracles upon which it was established would not take place for more than 1500 years!

But this is not the only hint to Chanuka in the Torah. There are numerous of them, with several in the parshios around Chanuka time. The 25th word in the Torah is ‘ohr,’ light, which hints to the light of Chanuka on the 25th of Kislev. When the Jews traveled forty-two journeys in the Wilderness, the 25th encampment was a place called ‘Chashmona,’ and the Maccabis were called ‘Chashmona’im,’ the Hasmoneans.

There are more allusions, but let us ask ourselves why the Torah offers so many hints to Chanuka, while allusions to Purim are fewer and more obscure?

Chanuka was a time when the world sought to dim our eyes and our souls by getting us to reject Hashem and His Torah. They wanted us to see ourselves as just another race of human animals, and that’s what Yehuda and his brothers were railing against. They pushed for purity and were rewarded with the miraculous oil which burned for eight nights, long enough to make more pure oil.

The Torah hints to the message that if we want to purify ourselves and establish a deep connection and dedication to Hashem, He will work wonders to enable us to do so. And that is something worth mentioning over and over again.

The Bluzhover Rebbe z"l retold the miraculous story of a terrible game the Nazis w"MY enjoyed. They forced the Jewish concentration camp inmates to dig a pit twenty feet across. They then had to jump to the other side. If any of them made it, they could live for another day. The ones that fell into the pit were shot and buried there.

Many took running jumps; a futile effort. The Bluzhover Rebbe walked up to the edge of the pit with a few of his Chasidim, closed his eyes and proclaimed, "We are jumping!" When he opened his eyes, he found himself on the other side of the pit. Next to him, he saw one of his closest Chasidim.

Amazed, the Rebbe said to him, "I know how I made it across. I was holding onto the kapoteh (cloak) of my saintly father and grandfathers. Their holy merit carried me. But how did you make it across?"

The disciple replied with simple faith – "Rebbe, I held on to YOUR kapoteh!" ©2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

The nature of the "work" that Yosef came to Potifar's house to do on the day when the Egyptian's wife sought to entice him to sin with her (Beraishis 39:11) is famously the subject of a disagreement between Rav and Shmuel.

One opinion is that Yosef intended "to do his [household] duties"; and the other, "to do his needs," i.e. to submit to the woman's blandishments - an intention that was undermined only after an image of Yaakov appeared to Yosef, giving him the strength to resist (Sotah 36b). (That latter opinion, with its portrayal of Yosef as vacillating before finally resisting may be audibly symbolized by the shalshelas cantillation of the word vayima'en, "and he resisted.")

Rav Simcha Bunim of Pshischa is quoted to have commented that the word "work" employed at the pivotal point in Yosef's life - when he earned the appellation tzaddik, "righteous" - holds the message that each of us has a "work" to accomplish in his life, not just in a general sense but with regard to acting - or not acting - at a pivotal moment, when we are faced with a decision that will define us.

Yosef's life-changing moment was when he was faced with an insistent Mrs. Potifar. Every person, the Pshischer suggested, will be faced with a pivotal moment, or moments, of his own, when his choice will make all the difference.

Which idea may lie behind Targum Onkelos' translation of "his work." He renders it in Aramaic as: "to audit his [Potifar's] financial records."

While that may simply be a presaging of the time-honored Jewish profession of accounting, the word Onkelos uses for "his financial records" is chushbenei. The word's root is cheshbon, "accounting," and it brings to mind its use in the phrase cheshbon hanefesh - an accounting of one's "soul," an examination of one's standing in his spiritual life.

Each of us is charged with discerning moments in life, when the choice before us may be pivotal. Of course, we never know whether what we are facing is indeed such a moment. And so, we are wise to treat every decision we face as potentially momentous. ©2024 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

Rabbi Avraham Pam, of blessed memory asked "What was so special about the miracle of the oil burning for eight days? The Talmud tells us that there were ten miracles that regularly occurred in the Temple (Pirke Avos, Ethics of the Fathers 5:7). None of these are commemorated."

Rabbi Pam cites the halachah (Jewish law) that for communal rituals, the prohibition against tumah (ritual impurity) may be waived. Many commentaries, therefore, ask why was there a need for a miracle at all? It was permissible to light the menorah even with ritually impure oil.

The P'nei Yehoshua answers that precisely because it was permissible to use impure oil that the only purpose of the miracle was to show G-d's intense love for Israel -- especially towards those who had defected to Hellenism, but returned to Torah observance with the triumph of the Macabees.

This is the message of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph did not simply forgive his brothers and suppress his resentment for their abuse of him. Rather, he loved them and cared for them as if nothing had happened, telling them that he feels toward them as he does to Benjamin, who was not involved in his kidnapping (Rashi, Gen. 45:12).

The celebration of Hanukah is, therefore, more than the commemoration of a miracle. We are to emulate the Divine attributes (Talmud Bavli, Shabbos 133b). Just as when G-d forgives, His love for us is completely restored, so must we be able to restore the love for one another when we mend our differences.

As we watch the Hanukah candles, let us think about the light they represent: the bright light of a love that is completely restored. *Dvar Torah from Twerski on Chumash by Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D. ©2015 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

