

D'Var Torah

Parsha Mikeitz

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Please note that the continuation of commentary on Vayeishev is located at the end of this document.

1. Measure for Measure

The parsha begins, **"It happened at the end (*Mikeitz*) of two years to the day; Pharaoh was dreaming..."** Pharaoh was dissatisfied with the way his dreams were being interpreted so he summoned Yosef from prison to interpret his dreams. Yosef was taken from prison and went on to make his meteoric ascent to the position as Viceroy of Egypt.

The Siphoro comments that we see the salvation of Hashem "comes about as quickly as a blink of an eye." Yosef was in prison for twelve years and because Pharaoh had dreams he needed to be interpreted, Yosef was removed from prison and instantly rose to great power. The Torah however makes a point to say that Yosef was taken from prison, "at the end of two years (to the day)." Meaning that Yosef was not to be released from prison a moment before his additional two year imprisonment was completed.

As we said previously, Chazal explain that Yosef asked the wine steward to "remember" him and "mention" him to Pharaoh in order to expedite his release. Hashem punished Yosef with an additional two-year imprisonment for the two words that he had spoken to the heathen (see commentary on Parsha Vayeishev). Yosef demonstrated a lack of faith by asking the Egyptian for help rather than relying on Hashem directly. However, at the end of these two additional years of imprisonment, Yosef was ready to become the Viceroy of Egypt.

The Gemara teaches us that Hashem punishes and rewards based on the principle of "measure for measure." How are we to understand the "measure for measure" regarding Yosef's prison sentence? Why was Yosef in prison for ten years? Why did he receive an additional two years in prison because of the two words he spoke to the wine steward?

Firstly, we need to understand what the punishment of imprisonment means. A prisoner is a person that has no control of his physical condition. The jailor controls the prisoner completely and his life is limited and defined by the will of the jailor.



The Gemara tells us that the wife of Potiphar tried to seduce Yosef and though he resisted her advances, he lost ten droplets of semen because of this incitement. For each droplet of semen that was lost, Yosef spent a year in prison. This combined with the two additional years for speaking the two words to the wine steward resulted in a twelve-year prison term for Yosef. What is the “measure for measure?”

The Maharal explains that the Jews were in Egypt for 209 years before Moshe came to lead the people to freedom. In the 210th year, Moshe performed a number of miracles in Egypt to establish himself as Hashem’s agent and the Jewish people asserted their belief that “Moshe was Hashem’s agent!” The Maharal cites the Midrash that at the moment the Jews believed, their enslavement ended immediately. The Egyptians were no longer able to subject the Jews to bondage.

The Maharal asks – what is the connection between the Jews believing and the halt of their enslavement by the Egyptians? The Maharal explains that a slave is a person who is completely affected and controlled by his master’s wishes; while in contrast, a spiritual person is unaffected by physical forces. A spiritual person goes against the grain of physical reality and thus is unaffected by outside influences.

From this, we can understand that the moment the Jews proclaimed their belief in Moshe as the agent of Hashem; they were proclaiming their belief in an all-powerful G-d despite the pagan belief of the Egyptians. Because of their spiritual character, which was unaffected, the Jewish slaves were able to rise above the physical constraints imposed upon them by their masters. Their enslavement ended instantly since the Jews were no longer being influenced by the pagan beliefs.

At the time of Moshe’s death, the Torah tells us that his eyesight was perfect and his physical health was excellent. He was 120 years old yet did not manifest the physical infirmities or deterioration typical of one who was about to die. Moshe did not decompose even after he was interred in his grave. The Maharal asks – why is it important for us to know about Moshe’s physical condition at the time of his death? How are we to understand the fact that Moshe’s body retained its freshness even in the grave?

The answer is that the aging process and decay are manifestations of being influenced by the physical world and normal physical life. Moshe, however, was at such a spiritual level that the physical world did not have any effect or influence on him. He was therefore not subject to the limitations of aging and decay. Moshe was a being that was completely uninfluenced by the physical world. Therefore, we can understand why he was like a young man in perfect physical health at the time of his death at 120 years.

Yosef was a spiritual being who had the dimension of his father Yaakov (Yisroel) as the spiritual heir to lead the Jewish people. Even though Yosef did not succumb to Potiphar’s wife’s seduction, he was affected to the degree of losing ten droplets of semen. Because Yosef was subjugated by the physical (demonstrated by the loss of

ten droplets of semen), Hashem punished him to ten years of subjugation in prison. This is the measure for measure. Since Yosef was influenced by his physical existence to the degree of ten droplets, he was affected by ten years of imprisonment.

After spending ten years in jail atoning for his failing with Potiphar's wife, Yosef would have been released. However, he made another mistake. Yosef allowed himself to be affected by his physical surroundings and as a result asked the wine steward to help him out of jail by "remembering" him and "mentioning" him to Pharaoh. These two words demonstrated the degree to which Yosef was affected by the physical condition. As the spiritual being that he was, Yosef should have asked Hashem for help, yet he asked the heathen, which was considered a lack of faith. For this, Hashem decreed that Yosef should remain under physical enslavement for two more years.

It was only at the end of these two years that Yosef was able to transcend the physical and regain his status as an unaffected spiritual being. After regaining that level of spirituality, he was no longer bound by the limitations of the physical world and was able to become the Viceroy of Egypt at the speed of a "blink of an eye." He was able to control existence and become the sustainer of the world.

2. Speaking Negatively About Others

Pharaoh needed someone to interpret his dreams. The wine steward informed Pharaoh that Yosef had the ability to interpret dreams since he had interpreted his dreams and the baker's dreams correctly while they were together in prison.

"My transgressions do I mention today... We dreamt a dream on the same night, I and he; each according to the interpretation of his dream did we dream. And there with us, was a youth, a Hebrew, a slave of the chamberlain of the butchers; we related it to him, and he interpreted our dreams for us... and it was that just as he interpreted for us so did it happen..."

When the wine steward told Pharaoh about Yosef, he did not refer to Yosef by name but rather he provided Pharaoh a rather lengthy description- **"a youth, a Hebrew, a slave of the chamberlain of the butchers."** Rashi cites the Chazal to explain, "Cursed are the wicked for their good deeds are incomplete." The wine steward mentions Yosef in demeaning terms "a youth," by this the wine steward meant that Yosef was a fool and not fit for a position of greatness. "A Hebrew" meant that Yosef was not even familiar with the Egyptian language. And "slave" as it is written in "...the protocols of Egypt that a slave may not rule and may not even wear princely garments."

The wine steward tried to disqualify Yosef at every level. He claimed that Yosef was a fool, ignorant of their language, and a slave unfit to ever reach greatness in Egypt. The fact is that Yosef performed a good deed for the wine steward -Yosef interpreted his dream. However, when the wine steward ultimately did mention Yosef to Pharaoh (as requested) it was in a highly diminutive manner. Why

did the wine behave in this manner? The answer is as Rash explains,” Cursed are the wicked for their good deeds are incomplete.” The wicked person is so evil that even when he has a chance to do good deeds he performs them in a disgraceful and limited manner.

The wine steward was a minister in the court of Pharaoh and he understood that if Yosef interpreted Pharaoh’s dreams correctly he would find favor in his eyes - thus causing Yosef to rise to power. If this were the case Yosef may exact revenge on the wine steward for his evil actions. Therefore, the wine steward referred to Yosef in the most degrading manner possible in order to negatively taint Pharaoh’s impression of him.

We know that first impressions have the greatest impact on a person. Since the wine steward described Yosef as incompetent, ignorant of the Egyptian language, and a slave, before Pharaoh met Yosef, he would have already formulated a negative impression of him. Even if Yosef were to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams correctly, the wine steward knew that his image was already sufficiently diminished so Yosef could not be appreciated for who he actually was.

We see from this that when one is asked about another person, we should be especially careful not to relay negative information about that person. The way we describe another person will greatly impact his image. In fact, if we relay negative information about someone he may never be able to recover from that negative depiction. We must understand the consequences of the way we speak about others and know that it may cause irreparable damage.

3. The Torah Sustains Judaism

We say every day during Chanukah in the *Shemona Esrei* the *A Haneesim* (on the miracles), **”When the wicked Greek kingdom rose up against Your people Israel to make them forget Your Torah and compel them to stray from the statutes of Your Will.”** The order of the prayer mentions that first the Greeks wanted the Jews to forget Torah and secondly to stray from Hashem’s statutes.

The Greeks understood exactly how to undermine Judaism and expedite assimilation. How was this done? The Gemara in *Hureous* states that a father has an obligation to teach his son Torah from the moment he is old enough to speak. The first pasuk of Torah that a father teaches his child is, ”Moshe commanded us with the Torah and this is the heritage of the congregation of Yaakov.” The second pasuk a father is obligated to teach his child is the *Shema* - “Hear, O Israel: Hashem is our G-d, Hashem, the One and Only.” – Which asserts our belief in the unity of G-d.

One would think that since monotheism is the most fundamental aspect of Judaism, the *Shema* would be the first pasuk a father teaches his child followed by the pasuk which states how Moshe commanded us with the Torah. Yet the Gemara says the opposite. The Rambam also rules in *Hilchos Talmid Torah* (The Laws of Learning Torah) that a father is obligated to teach his child the psukir

in the order as explained in the Gemara. Why are the psukim in this order?

The *Shema* states the fact of reality that Hashem is One. Chukim (Torah Statutes), such as the prohibitions of wearing a combination of wool and linen or eating milk with meat, are facts that cannot be deduced from rational thinking. The combination of wool and linen or eating meat and milk have a negative effect on a Jew's spirituality and are Mizvos that we cannot even begin to comprehend. These are among the various Statutes in the Torah that Jews follow without having any intellectual rationale. How can one relate to these Statutes?

If appreciate that Hashem is the One G-d and He commanded us to follow His Statutes then we would simply obey Him without question. However, since we do not comprehend and appreciate who Hashem is, we could easily try to argue with the reasonability of His Laws. How can we become more familiar with Hashem and grow to appreciate His ways? How can we understand Hashem's "mind" (so to speak)? If we are able to understand G-d perhaps we will begin to appreciate His Statutes. The only way to achieve this understanding is through the study of Torah.

If one studies Torah and is able to internalize the concepts and grow spiritually, then one can have a better sense of Hashem. If one has a sense of Hashem then he will realize that Statutes do not *need* to be rational for our thinking. Hashem is King of all kings! The person who learns Torah gains a spiritual orientation, which enables him to be in awe of G-d. Therefore we can understand why the Gemara states that a father is obligated to first teach his child the pasuk, "Moshe commanded us with the Torah..." because it is only through the study of Torah that we can appreciate the unity and greatness of Hashem which is asserted in the *Shema*.

With this, we can understand the *Al Haneesim* we insert in the *Shemona Esrei*. The Greeks understood how to undermine Judaism and ultimately eradicate it. They tried to make the Jews forget the Torah by prohibiting its study. If the Jews, G-d forbid, were to forget the Torah then they would lose their spiritual sensitivity to appreciating G-d. Jews would no longer risk their lives to observe Shabbos or to become circumcised. The Jew would no longer die for the sanctification of the month. However, if a Jew lives and breathes the Torah then a Jew would die for the Torah. The Greeks understood this and if it were not for the uprising of the *Chasmanoyim*, who were steadfast in their study of Torah, then the Greeks would have achieved their goal.

The catastrophe of assimilation in our own time is because the vast majority of Jews are not studying Torah. Even though Hashem promised that the Jewish people would never forget the Torah, the question is how many Jews are involved? Most Jews are disconnected and it is only a matter of time that they will fade out of existence because Torah is not present in their lives.

The Greeks understood how to eliminate the Jews – through the elimination of Torah. As we celebrate Chanukah and remember how we were able to defeat the Greeks, we should reflect on how we

need to continue to defeat the influences that would have the Jews forget Torah.

4. No Good Can Come From Evil

We read in the parsha that Pharaoh's wine steward depicted Yosef in the most negative terms as we explained earlier (Commentary #2) in order to taint him in the eyes of Pharaoh. We explained that it was done in order to discourage Pharaoh from being impressed with Yosef, thus promoting him to a position in which he could take revenge against the wine steward. Rashi explains, "Cursed are the wicked for their good deeds are not complete." The question to ask is why was the wine steward wicked? He was trying only to defend himself against the potential revenge from Yosef and his life was in jeopardy. Why do the Chazal depict him in such a negative way? How are we to understand this?

There is a negative commandment in the Torah that prohibits a Jew from taking revenge. The Gemara gives the example of revenge - If a person were to ask for a loan and was turned down by the potential lender and that lender were to later ask that same person for a loan, he is not permitted to deny him based on not receiving the originally requested loan. The saying is, "If you do not do for me I will not do for you." Even if a person may be undeserving because he does not help anyone but himself, the law is that one must not reject helping him on the basis of his behavior if he is in need. Why is this the case?

The *Chinuch* explains that the reason why a person is denied help from another person has nothing to do with him. It has to do with Hashem's not wanting the requester to benefit. That is why the person did not help. The Gemara tells us that G-d has many agents to carry out his dictates. Moreover, if Hashem wishes to send help to someone it can come from a variety of sources and is not dependent on a single individual.

When Yosef was not released from prison after ten years and remained for an additional two, it had nothing to do with the wine steward not helping him as requested. Yosef was not released after ten years because of his own spiritual failing and breach of faith in Hashem by asking the wine steward to "mention" and "remember" him when speaking with Pharaoh. This understanding of Yosef's situation is only evident to a person who has relevance to spirituality. A wicked person (a *rasha*) could not evaluate Yosef's situation in this spiritual manner because he can only process information through his own corrupted value system and evil mindset.

If the wine steward had been able to understand Yosef's situation through a spiritual context, he would have understood that he was not responsible for Yosef's imprisonment. He would have understood that it was through Yosef's own breach of faith that he remained in prison. If the wine steward understood this, he would not have needed to describe Yosef in pejorative terms to Pharaoh because he would have known that there was no revenge to fear. However since he was a *rasha*, the wine steward processed the

information in a manner consistent with a *rasha*. If an evil person had been in Yosef's position, he would have taken revenge upon release from prison. Therefore, the wine steward believed he needed to protect himself.

Everything a *rasha* does is tainted by his evil mindset and value system. The Gemara tells us that Bilaam wanted to curse the Jews and then he wanted to bless the Jews. Hashem told him to neither curse nor bless the Jewish people. The Chazal explain just as one says to a bee, Hashem said to Bilaam- "not your sting and not your honey!" But if Bilaam wanted to bless the Jews why did Hashem stop him?

The reason is that for whatever reason Bilaam wanted to bless the Jews it must have emanated from his evil because an evil person can only function within his own evil system. Hashem told Lavan, who was the epitome of evil that He did not want him to speak to Yaakov. "not good words and not bad words." This is because only evil could emanate from an evil person.

We can now understand why the Chazal referred to the wine steward as -"Cursed are the wicked for their good deeds are incomplete." A *rasha's* actions can never be complete because all of their actions are based on their own evil agenda and their own corrupt perspective of reality.

5. The Miracle of Illumination

We say every day during Chanukah in the *Shemona Esrei* the *A Haneesim* (on the miracles) which recounts how the Jews were able to defeat the Greeks even though the Jews were few in number. We mention how Hashem delivered the wanton into the hands of the diligent students of Torah, the strong into the hands of the weak, etc. The Maharal of Prague asks, why do we not mention the miracle of the lights of Chanukah? The fact that the Jews had found undefiled oil that was only enough to burn one day and it burned for eight days is not mentioned. Why?

The Maharal answers that the essence of the Chanukah miracle was the victory over the Greeks. The miracle of Chanukah is how the Jews were able to defeat the mighty Greeks even though they were greatly outnumbered. In order for us to appreciate the miracle of our victory and not to misinterpret it as a natural event (such as attributing it to guerrilla warfare), Hashem needed to bring about a revealed miracle that was the miracle of the oil which could not be misunderstood as anything but a miracle outside of nature. Through the miracle of the lights, Hashem marked that all of the events that had transpired were miraculous and that He brought about the victory of the Jews. The lights of Chanukah provide us with the clarity to be able to understand the incident of Chanukah correctly. The essence of the Holiday is that the Jews were able to vanquish their enemies and reestablish Judaism. This is why we do not mention the miracle of the lights in the *Al Hanessim*.

The question is why did the revelation of the victory over the Greeks need to be manifested through the lights? Hashem could have easily created any number of revealed miracles in order to make known his involvement – why the miracle of lights? Hashem could have simply made the Greeks vanish!

We learn that at Sinai, Hashem held a mountain over the heads of the Jewish people and gave them an ultimatum - either you observe the Torah or you will be buried under the mountain. The Midrash *Tanchuma* asks why did Hashem need to give the Jews an ultimatum? They had already said *naaseh V'nishma* "We shall do and we shall listen" - a level of dedication that even astounded the angels. The Jews were willing to accept Hashem's laws without ever knowing the extent of the obligation. So why did Hashem have to give them seemingly an unnecessary ultimatum?

The Midrash *Tanchuma* explains that *naaseh V'nishma* was referring to the Written Law. This did not include the Oral Law. The Written Law is limited without the Oral Law. Commandments prohibiting murder, theft, etc. are tantamount to living as a civilized human being and seemingly easy to follow; however, the commentaries and explanations contained in the Oral Law lead to a life long pursuit of understanding and observance. By dedicating one's life to this pursuit, he is sacrificing his entire life for the Oral Law. The Jews at Sinai were not willing to invest their entire lives in the understanding and observance of the Oral Law.

Hashem put a mountain over the Jews and gave them an ultimatum because He demanded that level of sacrifice. If the Jews were not willing to devote their lives to the Oral Law then the world would have come to an end.

The Gemara tells us that the Menorah in the Temple represents the Oral Law. The Holy Ark, which contained the tablets and the Torah (the Written Law), was located in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. On the other side of the curtain in the Temple, the Menorah was placed to illuminate the area. Similarly Oral Law is needed to elucidate the Written Law.

The miracle of Chanukah was revealed through the lighting of the Menorah. And as we said earlier, the Menorah represents the Oral Law, which is synonymous with self-sacrifice. The lighting of the Menorah represents the *Mesiras Nefesh* (self-sacrifice) needed to understand and uphold the Oral Law, which illuminates the Written Law. Without this self-sacrifice, people cannot develop themselves spiritually. Spirituality only comes through sacrifice. Since we are physical beings, we need to suppress the physical in order to bring about the spiritual, which in itself is a sacrifice.

It is true that the Jews were victorious over the Greeks and were able to defeat the many with only a few, but why did we merit this miracle? It is only because there was a handful of *Chashmanoyim* who were willing to die if they could not live as Jews. This was the self-sacrifice and this was the reason for the victory. How do we know that the *Mesiras Nefesh* was what brought about the miracle of Chanukah? The answer is the Menorah. Hashem chose to reveal the miracle of Chanukah through the lighting of the Menorah and not

through any other revealed miracle.

PARSAH VAYEISHEV

(Continued from last week)

1. Doing Our Part

In last week's parsha, Yosef was imprisoned in Egypt because he was accused of attempting to rape his master's wife, Potiphar. The Torah tells us that Yosef correctly interpreted the dreams of the Pharaoh's wine steward and baker who were imprisoned with him. Based on their dreams, Yosef explained to them that one would be released from prison and reinstated while the other one would be hanged - which is exactly what happened. After Yosef interpreted the dream of the wine steward, he asked him to "remember" him and to "mention" to Pharaoh that he was innocent. The Torah says that when the wine steward was released, "he did not remember Yosef, and he forgot him."

The Chazal explain that because Yosef asked the wine steward to "remember" him and to "mention" him to Pharaoh he had to remain in prison an additional two years. The reason for this was that Yosef had demonstrated a lack of faith in Hashem by making such a request of the wine steward when he should have asked Hashem directly. As it says in *Tehillim*, "Fortunate is the man who has placed his reliance upon Hashem and has not turned to the arrogant ones."

Why was Yosef punished for asking the wine steward to help him? The concept of *hishtadlus* demands that we take initiative and Hashem will help us. G-d helps those who help themselves. Was it not proper for Yosef to take the initiative by asking the wine steward to help him? This would seem consistent with the concept of *hishtadlus*.

Rabbanu Bachya explains that the degree of *hishtadlus* is dependent on the individual. Each person needs to take the initiative only to the degree that suits his level. Yosef who was at a uniquely high spiritual level and had a close relationship with Hashem, he should not have asked the wine steward for help. It was viewed as a failure that someone of such special, spiritual dimension like Yosef would ask a heathen for help. Because of this lack of faith Hashem held him accountable and punished him by keeping him imprisoned an additional two years. If it were any other person asking the wine steward to be remembered, it would have been considered an appropriate level of *hishtadlus*. This is Rabbanu Bachya's

explanation. How do we understand this?

Imagine having a close and intimate relationship with another individual who has always provided him with every possible need. One day when in need he seeks help from a complete stranger. When the intimate friend hears of this, he feels offended. He would say, "I would not hesitate to give you anything you need; yet you ask a stranger for his help! This is insulting!" Evidently, this kind of behavior indicates to the friend that he does not have as close a relationship as he believed, because he never gave you reason for doubting that he would not give you anything you need. This example elucidates Yosef's actions.

Since Yosef was at a very special spiritual level and had an intimate relationship with Hashem, he should have asked Hashem directly for help and not the wine steward. By asking the heathen for help, he indicated to Hashem that perhaps he did not believe in the relationship, as he should have. Yosef was the spiritual successor of Yaakov who was called "Yisroel," that was a confirmation of his spirituality. How could Yosef ask a heathen for help when he knew that Hashem was so close to him? Evidently, this reflected a failing within Yosef and thus he was punished. This would not be the case for any other person.

We are not at the same spiritual level as Yosef. Therefore, we need to take the initiative in this world in a very different way than he did. We need to ask Hashem to help us in addition to taking definite worldly actions in order to bring about results. Without taking the initiative, we would not be able to accomplish anything. The initiative we need to take varies from person to person.

The Gemara tells us that a person's yearly stipend is determined by Hashem on Rosh Ha Shana and is meant to sustain him for the entire year. The question is – what do we need to do to extract this sustenance? What initiative do we need to take? Do we need to work six hours a day or do we need to work 18 hours a day? What does Hashem want us to do?

Hashem definitely wants us to live as committed Jews. He wants us to pray three times a day, observe Shabbos properly, spend time with the family, learn Torah, and to perform Mitzvos. One may ask - how can I put in the needed initiative in order to make a living if I have to perform all of these obligations? Hashem refers to the Klal Yisroel as *Goy Kadosh (Holy Nation)*. This means that Hashem regards the Jews as His people and that He will provide us with all of our needs. Since Hashem determines our yearly stipend, all we

need to do is to take enough initiative that will not compromise our fulfillment of our Torah obligations. If we go beyond this level of initiative and overextend ourselves to the point of compromising our adherence to Torah then we are, at our own level, making the same mistake as Yosef.

Yosef asked the wine steward for help rather than asking Hashem directly and thus did not take the appropriate initiative vis-à-vis his spiritual level. If we overextend ourselves in achieving our material goals to the point of compromising our Torah obligations, then we too will not succeed. We will only succeed if we have the proper level of initiative within the context of Torah and Mitzvah observance.

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