

# The Parsha Discussion

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

## Miketz. Human Initiative; Divine Guidance



- Does faith in God mean a suspension of human initiative?
- Does a God-fearing person just adopt a fatalistic position, certain that “B’ezrat Hashem,” God will take care of our future?

A famous Midrash on the opening verse of our parsha seems to strongly underscore this sentiment.

If we recall, last week’s parsha saw Joseph in jail, interpreting the dreams of the butler and baker. As he foresees the butler’s return to his position, Joseph appeals to him:

“Remember me when all is well with you again, and do me the kindness of mentioning me to Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place.” (40:14)

However, his hopes were dashed:

“The butler did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.”

And as our parsha opens, “And it was, at the end of two years”, Rashi quotes Bereshit Rabbah 89:3 criticising Joseph for his self-reliance:

“Because Joseph relied on the butler to remember him, he was incarcerated for another two years, as it is said: “Praiseworthy is the man who made the Lord his trust and did not turn to the haughty””

I must admit that this comment has frequently caused me extreme discomfort.

### **Really? Please discuss this:**

- Does trust in God preclude human effort?

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- Does Judaism deride taking responsibility? Is human action a lack of faith?
- We celebrate the miracle of Channukah, but if the Maccabees had not fought (as we declare in the *Al-Hanissim* prayer), there would have been no victory and no miracle of the oil!
- Where is the line between human initiative and divine guidance?
- Was Joseph wrong?

I would like to suggest that we can read the story in the opposite direction as a story in which Joseph was correctly and appropriately pro-active, and yet a story in which God is highly present; after all, the Butler **does** recall Joseph at a particularly fortuitous moment, when Pharaoh has a baffling dream that all the experts cannot decode. At that moment, the butler remembers Joseph and brings him to Pharaoh's attention:

"I must make mention today of my offenses. Once Pharaoh was angry with his servants, and placed me in custody ... A Hebrew youth was there with us, ... and when we told him our dreams, he interpreted them for us, telling each of the meaning of his dream... Thereupon Pharaoh sent for Joseph..." (40:9-14)

We might take the opposite tack to the Midrash and say that Joseph's very legitimate request to the butler was indeed honoured with perfect timing. Had the butler mentioned Joseph at another juncture, his name would have been received without any special attention. But in the circumstances, he was the right person at the optimal time. In retrospect Joseph attributes his good fortune to God who "sent me here (45:8) and "has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction" (41.52).

In the final analysis, Joseph does everything he could do to carve his escape from jail, but it was God who aligned all the pieces ensuring a happy outcome.

As Rabbi Sacks puts it:

"The chief steward did not remember Joseph. He forgot about him." (40:23) The doubling of the verb is powerful. He did not remember. He forgot. The one time Joseph tries to be the author of his own story, he fails. The failure is decisive.

Tradition ...ended the parsha of Vayeshev with those words, leaving us at the point that his hopes are dashed. Will he rise to greatness? Will his dreams come true? The question "What happens next?" is intense, and we have to wait a week to know.

Time passes and with the utmost improbability (Pharaoh too has dreams, and none of his magicians or wise men can interpret them – itself odd, since dream interpretation was a specialty of the ancient Egyptians), we learn the answer. "Two full years passed." Those, the words with which our parsha begins, are the key phrase. What Joseph sought to happen, happened. He did leave the prison. He was set free. But not until two full years had passed.

... God, not Joseph, brought about the sequence of events – specifically Pharaoh's dreams – that led to his release.

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What we want to happen, happens, but not always when we expect, or in the way we expect, or merely because we wanted it to happen. God is the co-author of the script of our life, and sometimes – as here – He reminds us of this by making us wait and taking us by surprise.”  
(Covenant and Conversation 5777)

As we say Hallel each day of Channukah, I do think about how easy it is to look back at life and think that we did it all, that the Maccabees were brave resistance fighters who felled an evil regime by skill determination and cunning, and that our achievements are exclusively our own. And yet we recite Hallel and praise God, because, whereas we must do everything we can to succeed, we must simultaneously recognize that our success is dependent on a myriad of factors that are way beyond our control. As such, there is no contradiction between human effort and the divine hand. Both are constantly working, and there is plenty for which to thank the Almighty.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Channukah!