



dedicated learning. dynamic leadership.

Parshat Miketz: On Forgetting and Remembering

Rabba Sara Hurwitz

President and Co-Founder, Maharat

In parshat Miketz, the drama of the Joseph narrative moves slowly towards reconciliation between Yosef and his brothers. Before Yosef can forgive his brothers for throwing him in the pit, there must be a process of both forgetting and remembering.

First, in order to forgive, Yosef must begin to forget the trauma of his childhood. So, he consciously names his firstborn son, Menashe (Bereishit 41:51)

And Joseph named the firstborn Menashe, for "God has caused me to forget all my toil and all my father's house."

וַיִּקְרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת שֵׁם הַבְּכוֹר מְנַשֶּׁה כִּי נִשְׁכַּח
אֵלֶיהֶם אֶת כָּל עֲמָלִי וְאֶת כָּל בֵּית אָבִי

Why, just at the moment when Yosef rises as chief viceroy, when he had the freedom to contact his father, would he forget?

The construction of the word נִשְׁכַּח "has caused me to forget," is quite unusual. It is the same root that is used in describing the הַנֶּשֶׁה, the thighbone that is dislocated when Yaakov struggles with the Angel. Rashi (Bereishit 32:330) references this week's parsha interpreting נִשְׁכַּח to imply a letting go, translating the sentence as "for God has made me *spring away* from all my hardship," so that I can begin my life with new vigor and strength. The process of dislocation or discontinuity allows Yosef to leap into a new place, a new mode of being.

The process of forgetting is cathartic and allowed Yosef to let go of the pain and rejection he felt from his family and embrace his new leadership role. The Netziv, in the Ha'amek Davar (41:51), suggests that Yosef must embrace oblivion; in forgetting, he will no longer be haunted by both the loving and traumatic memories of his childhood. Forgetting, allows for a kind of letting go, making space, forgiveness.

At the same time, however, the brothers must confront, must remember, what they did to their brother. Just a few *pasukim* later, Yosef, disguised as an Egyptian, requests that the brothers bring Binyamin down to Egypt. This request seems to shake them into a reverie of regret.

And they said to one another, "Indeed, we are guilty for our brother, that we witnessed the distress of his soul when he begged us, and we did not listen. That is why this trouble has come upon us." (Bereishit 42:21).

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו אָבֵל אֲשֶׁמִּים | אֲנַחְנוּ עַל אָחִינוּ
אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהִתְחַנְּנוּ אֵלֵינוּ וְלֹא שָׁמְעֵנוּ עַל כֵּן
בָּאָה אֵלֵינוּ הַצָּרָה הַזֹּאת (בראשית מב:כא)

Nehama Leibowitz, quoting Meir Weiss, a Biblical scholar, suggests that this flashback, recalling the "long buried episode, here, at this juncture, represents the awakening of the brothers' consciousness." (Leibowitz p.464). For the first time, they experience regret for their egregious sin, and it causes anguish to rise up in their soul. Only now, that they are willing to remember, to confront the episode of throwing their brother into a pit, can they begin the process of *teshuvah*, of repentance.



dedicated learning. dynamic leadership.

The journey towards reconciliation requires both parties, the offender and the victim, to go through a transformative process of *agmat nefesh*, of soul searching. Yosef had to forget so he could forgive. The brothers had to remember so they could repent.

Rabba Sara's Overarching Theme:

Feeling God's presence, shouldn't be that difficult. "You shall walk after the Lord your God,"(Devarim 12:5) we are told; seek out God's presence. And yet, astonished, R. Hama son of R. Hanina (Talmud Bavli, Sotah 14a) asks, how is it possible to walk with the Shechina? Rav Hama quotes an early pasuk from Devarim that describes "... the Lord your God as a devouring Fire."(Devarim 4:24). How is it possible to get close to God without being scorched? R. Hama answers his own question: We must walk after the *midot*, after the attributes of God, not his immediate presence.

In Hebrew, good attributes, *midot*, are translated as "good measures." Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz in *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, suggests that a quality is determined by its proportion. In other words our *midot* are the balance of our varied characteristic traits. To act Godly is to put our best spiritual essence forward, while trying to keep in check the inevitability of negative attributes. We are at once both good and bad, compassionate and injurious.

At Yeshivat Maharat, our students are ordained with the ability to lead, *pasken*, and teach. But, they must also be finely attuned to the nuances of the human condition. Spiritual leaders are most effective when they have confronted and understand their own *midot*, their own balance of human traits. Our Torah narratives bring to bare the multi-layers of the characteristic traits that individuals must learn to balance within themselves.

And so, I offer this weekly parsha column as a model of Yeshivat Maharat's Pastoral Torah curriculum, where we will explore the rich and varies layers of the human condition.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.