

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Miketz)

A time comes in your life when you finally get it...when in the midst of all your fears and insanity you stop dead in your tracks and somewhere the voice inside your head cries out "Enough."

Enough fighting and crying or struggling to hold on. And, like a child quieting down after a blind tantrum, your sobs begin to subside, you shudder once or twice, you blink back your tears, and through a mantle of wet lashes you begin to look at the world through new eyes.

This is your awakening.

You come to terms with the fact that he is not Prince Charming and you are not Cinderella (or visa versa) and that in the real world there aren't always fairy- tale endings (or beginnings for that matter) and any guarantee of "happily ever after" must begin with you-and in the process, a sense of serenity is born from acceptance.

You stop complaining and blaming other people for things they did to you (or didn't do for you), and you learn that the only thing you can really count on is the unexpected. You learn that people don't always say what they mean or mean what they say and not everyone will always be there for you and that it's not always about you. So you learn to stand on your own and to take care of yourself and in the process, a sense of safety and security is born of self-reliance.

You stop judging and pointing fingers, and you begin to accept people as they are and to overlook their shortcomings and human frailties-and in the process a sense of peace and contentment is born of forgiveness.

You learn that it is truly in giving that we receive. And there is power and glory in creating and contributing.

You learn that you don't know everything, it's not your job to save the world, and that you can't teach a pig to sing.

You learn that anything worth achieving is worth working for and that wishing for something to happen is different from working towards making it happen.

You learn that life isn't always fair, you don't always get what you think you deserve, and that sometimes, bad things happen to unsuspecting, good people. On these occasions, you learn not to personalize things. You learn that G-d isn't punishing you or failing to answer your prayers. It's just life happening. And you learn to deal with evil in its most primal state-the ego. You learn that negative feelings such as anger, envy, and resentment must be understood and redirected or they will suffocate the life out of you and poison the universe that surrounds you.

You learn to admit when you are wrong and to build bridges instead of walls. You learn to be thankful and to take comfort in many of the simple things we take for granted, things that millions of the people upon the earth can only dream about: a full refrigerator, clean running water, a soft warm bed, a long hot shower. Slowly, you begin to take responsibility for yourself by yourself, and you make yourself a promise to never betray yourself and to never ever settle for less than your heart's desire.

You hang a wind chime outside your window so you can listen to the wind. And you make it a point to keep smiling, to keep trusting, and to stay open to every wonderful possibility.

Finally, with courage in your heart and with G-d by your side, you take a stand, you take a deep breath, and you begin to design the life you want to live as best you can.

Anonymous

Awakenings. We all need them, but how do we achieve them? This week's portion, Miketz, begins with a fascinating story that gives us a glimpse into the possibility of awakenings.

Joseph, an imprisoned slave in Egypt, is called to the palace to interpret the dreams of the great Pharaoh.

Pharaoh is deeply troubled by two dreams that apparently leave him no rest. Seven seemingly healthy wheat-stalks are devoured by seven dying ones, and then, in a second dream, seven fat, robust cows are devoured by seven sickly, dying ones.

Joseph's interpretation: Egypt will experience seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of famine that will overshadow or 'devour' the previous years of plenty.

Now Pharaoh needs a plan, and Joseph offers the solution: Stockpile during the seven years of plenty, and distribute food in exchange for land during the years of famine. This will not only allow Egypt to survive the difficult famine, but will also serve to consolidate her status as the economic power in the region.

Ultimately, Joseph is appointed viceroy and as the second highest official in Egypt becomes the instrument for affecting this policy.

This entire scenario is nothing short of incredible. Joseph's solution does not seem to be a stroke of genius; why are all the advisors and ministers of Egypt, the greatest country on earth at the time, incapable of arriving at this same conclusion?

Additionally, the idea of the ruler of the empire actually soliciting and relying on the interpretation of a slave wallowing in prison, not to mention subsequently asking for his solution to his own interpretation, resulting in the appointment of said slave to one of the highest posts in the world, is absurd. What is really going on here?

Incidentally, this portion of Miketz is *always* read on the festival of Chanukah. Is there some relationship between the story of Chanukah we are currently commemorating, and the rise of Joseph to power in Egypt?

Dreams are an opportunity for us to discover more about who we are, where we are really at, and what is in our hearts and minds. Of course, their ability to impact our lives depends entirely on our ability to interpret them. So everything depends on our perspective, and often on our success in changing our perspectives, or seeing things outside of the box.

Joseph in ancient Egypt represented an entirely different way of seeing things.

The ancient Egyptians worshipped nature as the source of all life. They worshipped the power of nature, as well as idolized all aspects of the natural order. Thus, they deified the Nile, which they felt was the source of all sustenance in this world. Central to their ideology and beliefs, therefore, was the concept that the strong survive, and might makes right, as nature dictates.

The idea, therefore, that pale, dying, sickly animals could devour fat, healthy ones was contrary to the natural order and everything they believed. After all, the lesson of nature is that the strong survive and the weak perish. Survival of the fittest was not just a lesson of the environment; it was an ideal to live by.

Perhaps, therefore, the Egyptians, locked as they were in their own mindset, were incapable of seeing things from a different perspective. Perhaps they were in need of an awakening. Indeed, the emergence of the Jewish people on the world scene may well have been indicative of the fact that the *world* was in need of just such an awakening.

It is interesting to note just what Joseph's solution was. Taken from the perspective of the ancient, pagan Egyptian, it may well have been a radical proposal. After all, famine is just nature's way of cleansing. The strong survive, and the weak perish, and along with them the diseases and problems they carry which are, in the end, burdens on society. And there is no over-population. The idea of stockpiling food in order to save the population, not to mention parceling out food to other populations in the region, something which ostensibly could undermine their ability to consolidate their position as the power in the region, may well have been counter to everything ancient Egypt stood for.

(And Pharaoh, in agreeing to call for Joseph, a lowly slave to begin with, may actually be effecting an interpretation of his own: perhaps we need to hear what the 'sickly, weak bushel of wheat' has to say...)

Joseph offers Egypt a different way of seeing things. Life doesn't have to be that way; the strong and the weak can live side by side and help each other. Ultimately, in becoming the viceroy of Egypt, Joseph will have the chance to practice what he preaches. From the darkness of a jail cell, seemingly forgotten and insignificant, Joseph will ultimately bring to the ancient world its first awakening.

A thousand years later, the Greeks too worshipped nature; they deified beauty; and saw as the ideal all things beautiful in nature. This worship of nature opened the door, giving license to all the most basic urges of man.

The Greeks built gymnasiums where man could develop his body; the pursuit of the perfect body was expressed in Greek sculpture and art. The people entertained themselves in the stadiums, where men honed their physical skills, developing animal-

like prowess and cunning. Man no longer *served* G-d; man *was* god. Hence the gods of Greece were men. And the qualities worshipped in those gods were all the qualities men could achieve: love and beauty, courage and agility, strength and speed. Thus could Antiochus Epiphanes erect idols of himself. He was after all, the highest of men; he had achieved all that man could achieve: power and might, strength and cunning. He was, therefore, the most powerful god in the world. (Interestingly, Epiphanes means 'I am G-d').

Judaism, however, has a different dream, not of fashioning a G-d *of* the world, but of bringing G-d *into* the world. It does not see the body as a goal, but as a *tool* in the service of G-d.

Here too, a small band of priests and farmers, revolting against mighty Greece in 168 BCE, taught the world that might does not make right, and that power is not the goal, it is merely a tool.

The animal side of man, worshipped by the pagan world, is not to be idolized; not made the ideal; rather, it is to be channeled, even directed, in the pursuit of a relationship with G-d.

To be sure, there is a beauty in nature, magnificence, even. But it is precisely that beauty that can lead man to *find* G-d in the world, not to ignore Him.

And this really is the central message of Chanukah: that the victory was meaningless if it was only in the service of man. What made it significant for Jews everywhere, forever, was the recognition of a greater truth: the re-dedication of the Temple, and the re-establishment of man as serving G-d.

In fact, the name Chanukah also stems from the root word "Chen", meaning Beauty. And one of the issues, central to all that Chanukah represents, is the real meaning of beauty. The Greeks worshipped beauty as part of nature; and they considered themselves experts on this beauty. Greek beauty, however, is external; it focuses on the symmetry in nature, and aspires to recreate this in man, and in all that man does. It is about what we see, but not about who we are and who we can become. Greek beauty is about the perfect body; but it neglects the perfection of character; it strives to perfect the physical self; but denies the spiritual self within.

Judaism's perception is quite different: beauty is *inner* symmetry; the perfection of my neshama, the soul within me; that part of me that strives to come close to G-d.

Physical beauty is only valuable if it is a vessel for real, inner beauty. Judaism sees the beauty of harmony in the world; but not just external harmony; the homogeneity of purpose; the beauty in understanding the true meaning of our being; the struggle with the existential question of why we are here; what our purpose on this earth is. The Greeks, whose religion was essentially hedonism, had a very straightforward response to this question: we are here to have a good time; to make the most of the time we have.

The Jews, on the other hand, believe that we are here to perfect the world; to make the world a better place. In doing this we become partners with G-d. Hence, the name

'Chanukah' expresses the essence of the holiday's role in conveying this message to mankind.

Perhaps this ideological difference is at the root of our celebration of Chanukah.

If Chanukah were about military victory, there wouldn't really be that much to celebrate. In fact, the newly found independence of the Hasmonean dynasty lasted a scant quarter-century, before giving way to the new master: Rome. And even in its heyday, it comprised barely 35 square miles around Jerusalem, and a strip of land in what is today the Gaza strip; hardly an accomplishment worthy of so much fuss. No, clearly, the celebration is of something far deeper, far more lasting, than the defeat of a few Greek soldiers.

Chanukah was coming, and the Jews were dreading its' arrival; the Nazis always liked to play games on Jewish holidays. There was one boy, about to turn thirteen, who could not imagine his bar mitzvah Chanukah passing by without any celebration. So, a couple of weeks before Chanukah, he began to save little scraps of his meager potato ration, hoping to use it as oil. Every day, he set aside a little piece of potato and placed it in his pocket. He ripped threads from his camp uniform and fashioned them into wicks. When the first night of Chanukah arrived, word spread that there was a boy lighting Chanukah candles; the barrack was soon filled with inmates. One could sense the despair, as the Jews looked around at their reality, and recalled happier times, when Chanukah was so full of light.

All eyes were on the boy as he made his way to the back of the barrack, knelt down on the floor, and prepared his candles. Any act of religious expression in the camps was a crime punishable by death; this child was not only risking his life, but the lives of the entire barrack. But no one said a word. Total silence filled the room, as the boy lit the flame and began the recitation of the blessings.

"Blessed art thou...who has sanctified us...and commanded us to light the candles of Chanukah."

Lighting candles in Bergen Belsen? Was there ever any place as dark as that place in the shadows of the crematoria?

"Blessed art thou...who performed miracles for our ancestors; in those days and in our time as well"

Did G-d have any miracles left, here in the valley of death?

A crash, as the door burst open; an SS officer stood in the doorway, resplendent in his black uniform; the death's head insignia gleaming. The crowd of inmates parted as he strode to the back of the barracks, the only sound, his footsteps approaching the little boy.

"Get rid of those candles, schnell!" screamed the officer in a rage.

The boy looked up at the officer, and back again at the candles; and in a quiet voice, that resonated in the barracks, responded:

"But sir, today is Chanukah; and on Chanukah we don't extinguish light, we bring it into the world."

The silence between the officer and the boy was deafening; and then, by some miracle, the officer inexplicably turned and strode out of the barracks.

Why is lighting the candles of the Menorah so critical to Chanukah?

Why was it so important, in the story of Chanukah, to light the Menorah in the Temple? There is, after all, no mention of any of the other ritual ceremonies: the burning of incense, the offering of sacrifices, and the showbread; to name but a few.

A Menorah is about giving light. What is the purpose of light? Light itself allows man to see, and consequently to derive pleasure from, the world around him. This, however, is most certainly not the idea behind lighting the candles on Chanukah. One of the prayers traditionally recited when lighting the Chanukah lights, is the "Nerot Halalu" prayer:

"Ve'Ein Lanu Reshut Le'Hishtamesh Ba'hem"

'We have no permission to use them.'

We are not meant to benefit physically from these candles; neither to read by their light, nor to use the heat of their fire for any pleasure or gain.

"E'la LirO'tam Bilvad"

'We are only to see them.'

Sometimes we need to take a step back and just appreciate the light. We need to see all the light in the world around us, and in our lives, and we need to recall that we are here, in the end only to bring light.

And that light is not about what I can get, nor how much I can conquer, it is all about what I can give.

Two thousand years ago, after a horrific war against the mightiest empire on the face of the earth, the Jews re-conquered the Temple and discovered pigs running around the altar, and an idol of Jupiter in the Holy of Holies. But after all that, there was no rage, all they wanted to do was to light the menorah. All the Jews have ever wanted to do is bring a little light into the world.

Chanukah, then, like Joseph's message so long ago, is an opportunity to re-experience that light. To recall that the greatest gift we can give, is the gift of light.

This too, was a message the world needed to hear; this was the awakening of Chanukah.

Four thousand years ago a single individual, alone and bereft, gave the world a message it needed to hear. Two thousand years ago, a small nation, alone and bereft, again gave the world a message it needed to hear.

Today, alone amongst the community of nations, Israel has a message the world needs to hear. It is time to kindle the flame that will bring light back into the world. It is time for an awakening.

May Hashem bless us all, as individuals, as a people, and as a world, to experience the awakening we all so desperately need. As the verse in the prayers after a meal suggests:

"Az Hayinu Ke'Cholmim" "Then we will be like dreamers", awakening from a long dream, to discover the clarity of morning...

Best wishes to all for a Shabbat Shalom as well as a sweet and wonderful Chanukah full of light...

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