

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Miketz)

Many years ago, a fellow walked into a class I was giving (in a co-ed Jewish outreach program) with his girlfriend, and something about him immediately caught my attention. The class was on the Holocaust and the challenge of our relationship with G-d in a post Holocaust world; halfway through the class he raised his hand and when he spoke I realized what it was that had caught my attention: he was German, with a strong German accent.

He was not Jewish, though he had a Jewish girlfriend who had joined him, and they ended up signing on for a three week program we were running in Jerusalem's Old City.

Eventually, I found out his story: He was from Munich and was in Israel on a summer volunteering program. A year earlier he had been going through a box in his grandparents' home and accidentally found his grandfather's Nazi membership card. This led him to an eventual confrontation with his grandfather. And the response his grandfather gave him was what sent him on his journey of self-discovery:

"If you had been there then, you would have joined as well!"

Subsequently the boy asked me a question for which I had no answer:

"Would I have joined the Nazi party? How do I know I wouldn't have?"

As a result of his confrontation with his grandfather he began to try and understand why the Germans had hated us so much...

This story reminded me at the time, of a similar discussion in the Gemara (Talmud; tractate ***Sanhedrin 102b***):

Rav Ashi, in a dream, takes a harsh view of the wicked King Menashe (son of the righteous king Chizkiah). Menashe reigned for fifty five years and the Book of Kings (Sefer *Melachim; Kings II 21:16*) shares how his actions "were evil in the eyes of G-d" and how he led the Jewish people astray to follow the path of idolatry from which they never quite recovered. (Jewish tradition attributes the ultimate fall of the first Jewish commonwealth and the subsequent destruction of the first *Beit Ha'Mikdash* (Temple) to the evil inspired during his reign...)

In response to this critique, wicked King Menashe says to Rav Ashi:

'Had you been there, you would have ... run after me to serve those idols!'

How do we avoid the unhealthy patterns of behavior that so often surround us in society? What steps can we take to make sure that we will be better; that we will avoid the pitfalls of the mistakes of our predecessors?

There is a fascinating question in this week's portion of *Miketz*:

Twenty years after throwing Yosef into a pit and watching him sold as a slave, the brothers are forced to come down to Egypt in search of food during the devastating famine gripping the Middle East. Clearly, the guilt of the story of Yosef is still very much on their minds (*Bereishit* (Genesis) 42:21-22). Yet when they are brought before Yosef, who is now the Viceroy of the Pharaoh, he instantly recognizes them, but they are totally oblivious as to the true identity of the ruler who sits before them. (ibid. 42:8-9)

Yosef (Joseph) seems to be doing everything but drop a hammer to see if the brothers will recognize him after all these years, yet they don't seem to get it!

He enquires about their father and asks if they have a younger brother. And then he demands that same younger brother's presence (ibid. 42:20) before any more food will be sold to them! Aren't they curious as to why he is bothering with them?

Even when the money they have paid mysteriously ends up back in their bags (ibid. 42:27-28) they still don't figure it out! And when they come back to Egypt months later to replenish their food supply, fearful due to the money they never actually paid, Joseph's minister invites them all to a banquet in their honor in the palace while claiming to already have been paid (ibid. 43:20-23) and they still don't get it! *Why is this Viceroy playing with them?*

And it continues: Yosef keeps enquiring after their Old father's health (ibid. 43:27), and even seats them in order of their birth (ibid. 43:33) which causes the brothers to "*wonder in amazement*"! But they still don't put two and two together, not even when Binyamin is given an additional portion! (ibid. 43:34)

It almost seems that no matter what Yosef does the brothers just cannot see that something is going on; don't they consider the possibility that this is really Yosef? Is his appearance that different? He was only in his thirties (ibid. 41:46) and he was after all, their brother, yet absolutely none of them recognize him; why?

Rashi, quoting the Talmud (Tractate *Yevamot 88a*) suggests (ibid. 42:8-9) that Yosef recognized the brothers because they had beards when he left home (i.e. they were already bearded; their appearance has not changed all that much...) But they did not recognize Yosef because back then he had no beard, implying his appearance had significantly changed.

But... really? All ten (eventually eleven) of them did not recognize Yosef because now he had... a beard? Perhaps there is something else at play here.

It is interesting to note that Rashi could have just said they did not recognize Yosef for now he had a beard. Instead, Rashi employs a much lengthier verbiage describing both the fact that Yosef back then did not have a beard and that the brothers did. Perhaps the reason the brothers did not, indeed *could not* recognize Yosef, was because the Yosef they were thinking of no longer existed.

A bearded, aged, mature man is really a person who has come of age, established his behavior patterns and is most often set in his ways. He has a particular view of the world which is part of what maturity is all about. And for most of us, once we become set in our ways, it becomes very hard to change.

Their negative view of Yosef had not changed; in their minds he was the spoiled brat who preened himself vainly in the mirror (ibid. Rashi 37:2 quoting *Bereishit Rabbah* 84:7). Perhaps they could not imagine this spoiled teenager who had been easily thrown in a pit, to now be the ruler essentially responsible for the welfare of the civilized world?

But it is so much more than that: At the heart of the conflict between Yosef and his brothers is the question of dreams.

Yosef dreams of their sheaves bowing down to his, and stars bowing down to his star. And he innocently (naively?) shares them with his older brothers who mock him and become incensed. Why do the dreams of a vain teenager so upset them? Perhaps this is the core of the issue. What indeed do dreams signify?

As Rav Weinberg suggests in his *Frameworks*, perhaps the brothers see these dreams as reflective of Yosef's flawed personality with images of grandeur and aspirations to rule divorcing him from reality. Indeed, Freud made a career based on the idea that our dreams are a window deep into our personalities: Essentially, what we dream is who we are. And if this is who Yosef is, then something is very wrong.

But Yosef understands dreams to be a message from Hashem (G-d) and a prophecy foretelling the future: dreams, especially if they recur, are shedding light on what is yet to come. They are less about who we are than about where we are going.

Perhaps this is why the brothers are blinded from recognizing Yosef for the man he is; they are too stuck on the flaws of who he was. Indeed, it may be no accident that the brother held captive by Yosef is Shimon, the brother most responsible for not believing the people of Shchem could change, slaughtering them after their communal circumcision, in the story of Dinah... (ibid. 34:25-31)

Dreams tell us what we need to work on now, and with all that work, mired in the flaws of today, it becomes difficult to consider the possibility of a different tomorrow. But dreams also tell us that tomorrow can be different; that if we do the work on ourselves today, we can become the person we dream of becoming. Perhaps that was a lesson Yosef needed to share with his brothers; that we all have the capacity to change and to be different; we are not mired in the circumstances of today; we can change everything to create a better tomorrow.

Not by chance is this week's portion called *Miketz* which means 'at the end of', representing the point a person can decide to climb up out of the pit of his circumstances be they as tragic as the pain of having conspired to kill a brother, or as simple as the desire to change a habit that is bringing us down...

And not accidentally does this story always appear for us on the Shabbat of Chanukah: when the desire of the few to bring light back into the world overcame the seemingly inescapable darkness of a world ruled by the Greek Empire.

We can all change, and when we change ourselves, we can change one little wick at a time...

Shabbat Shalom and happy Chanukah from Yerushalayim,

Binny Freedman