

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality (Miketz)

From Rav Binny Freedman

It was one of the darkest moments of my life. In retrospect it seems almost trivial; so insignificant against the backdrop of the significant events one experiences in life: marrying the girl of your dreams; the birth of your children; walking your daughter down the aisle at her wedding or holding your grandchild for the first time.... But at the time it seemed like my life had entered a dark cloud and I could not begin to fathom why it was happening.

After completing two months of basic infantry training, two months of tank school training to become a tank driver followed by the armored corps' grueling twelve-week field training course, and then successfully completing tank commander's course I was invited to IDF Officer training. This is a course by invitation only; no matter how much you want it the army has to decide you are worth the spot. I recall struggling with the decision as it meant signing up for a lot more army time, with no guarantee I would finish. As it turned out, I did not know the half of it.

There were two hundred and fifty of us who had been invited to try our hand at getting into Officer's course and we were assembled for a month-long 'mechin' or prep course. The armored corps only had eighty spots for Officer's course, and they wanted to be sure the cadets they chose would make it through. I was by then a tank commander with the rank of sergeant, and the temptation to let it go and finally enjoy army service as a soldier with rank, was almost overpowering. But I reasoned that if I had been offered a chance for a spot I had to try; maybe it was all part of Hashem's plan....

I can still remember, after an intense month of constant tests, exhausting runs, navigations, and a variety of training exercises designed to see how we would fare under pressure, the day the names were called out. We were assembled on the parade ground (misdar) standing at attention while the eighty names were called out in what is known as a misdar de'maot or 'parade of tears'; tears for the one hundred and seventy cadets who would not be going on to officer's course.

Four months later after an even more painfully difficult IDF officer's course at the infamous Bahd Echad, (IDF training base One) I can recall every moment of the day we received our IDF Officer oak leaf-and-sword pin.

Now there was only one course left; four months of one of the most grueling courses in the IDF was all that stood between me and receiving my second lieutenant's bars: the IDF Tank platoon commander's course.

And after three months and twenty-seven days, averaging three hours sleep a night, having slept in an actual bed for no more than seven or eight of those days, with just three days left to the course, a tribunal consisting of my company commander, battalion commander and the base commander, explained that they did not feel in good conscience they could send me out into the field to command men under fire.

I remember feeling it had all been like a whirlwind; perhaps it was my Hebrew which was still not up to snuff, or the fact that after so many courses one after the other I had not had enough field experience to run my maneuvers smoothly enough, but after the company commander had personally overseen one of my maneuvers followed by the battalion commander on a subsequent maneuver, my scores were apparently not high enough.

I had been given due notice throughout the course that my scores were borderline, but we had actually completed the course and were in the process of preparing for the final ceremony, practicing on the parade ground, giving back the gear we had signed off on, cleaning the tanks, and I could already taste it; I had allowed myself to think I was done, when they had sent word I was to appear that evening in dress uniform for a tribunal reviewing my course status.

They told me I was good; I just wasn't good enough. And ten minutes later I was done; told I was free to leave the base and report for a new unit as a tank commander, the thought of spending the night on base watching all my buddies joking around and preparing for the ceremony was too much to bear.

Which was why I found myself at ten o'clock at night on a lonely stretch of road outside the base in the middle of the Negev desert, desperately waiting to hitch a ride, any ride and get as far away as I could from what I was now desperate to put behind me. For six hours I stood on the lonely road beneath the night sky full of stars with my kitbag and gear trying to figure it all out; if I was not meant to be an officer then what was the point of all the hell I had just been through? It was absolutely one of the darkest nights of my life....

This week's portion of *Miketz* offers us a glimpse into just such a moment in the life of Yosef: beloved and favored son of Yaakov.

After being sold as a slave and eventually plucked out of the pit of Egypt's Royal prison system, Joseph, literally overnight, finds himself standing in front of no less than Pharaoh himself being asked to interpret his dreams.

The seven fat healthy cows consumed by the seven sickly cows along the Nile, and the second dream of seven healthy wheat stalks consumed by seven moldy stalks all mean there will be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine.

And we all know how the story plays out: Pharaoh, impressed by Joseph's wisdom and humility ("*it is G-d who provides the interpretations of dreams...*") appoints him to be the viceroy over the entire Egyptian empire, and in a moment, the lowly slave has become the second most powerful person in the world.

But there is one fascinating and seemingly insignificant detail in the story that begs a question: Pharaoh has two dreams, and they both seem to be identical. So why the need for both dreams?

Joseph actually explains this puzzling detail:

"That Pharaoh has dreamed this twice means that G-d is firmly resolved regarding this plan and is speedily setting it in motion." (Genesis 41:32)

And one wonders how Joseph knows this? It may well be that G-d has shared with Joseph a prophecy to that effect, but the Torah usually shares such information as prophecy; here, there is no 'and G-d spoke to Joseph...' so one has to wonder.

Think about it: Pharaoh is not the first person to have two dreams; Joseph himself had two dreams many years earlier, which seemed to be the prelude for everything that happened subsequently as the favored son of Yaakov, dreaming of wheat bushels and even the sun moon and stars bowing down to him, suddenly found himself in a pit and then as a slave in darkest Egypt wondering what had happened.

It is hard to imagine Joseph standing before Pharaoh, not recalling his own dreams as well, and one wonders if Joseph suddenly began to realize he was finally getting a glimpse of the bigger picture.

It must have been devastating for Joseph; one minute he was the favored son of Yaakov, gifted with a beautiful technicolor coat as a symbol of his father's love and dreaming of great things; even the sun moon and stars would bow down to him!

He must have felt G-d was guiding his path: he was destined for greatness.

And in a whirlwind of events he found himself in a pit of despair. First the pit his brothers threw him in, and later the pit of Egyptian servitude. Gone were his delusions of grandeur as the years snuck by and no salvation seemed imminent.

His beloved father Yaakov was not coming to save him and no one seemed to care as he languished in the pit of despair; even the butler whose life he had saved had long forgotten him.

But the Talmud tells us:

“Yeshuat Hashem ke'heref ayin”

“The salvation of Hashem (G-d) can come like the blink of an eye”

And as Joseph stands before Pharaoh, perhaps he finally starts to realize this was all part of a bigger picture. It was not the brothers who had thrown him into that pit all those years ago; Hashem had placed him in that pit; indeed, Hashem had been guiding his journey all these years.

In fact, it is fascinating to note that Joseph as a young lad dreamed of wheat bushels bowing down, and Pharaoh dreamed of wheat stalks being consumed, and it was through the storing of wheat and its later barter that Joseph becomes the instrument for G-d's plan causing the brothers to eventually come down to Egypt.

And of course, the brothers' coming to Egypt leads to the eventual servitude of the Jews in Egypt which itself leads to the eventual Exodus which of course leads to the giving of the Torah and the Ten Commandments and the Jews' eventual return to the land of Israel... because it's all part of Hashem's plan....

Perhaps Joseph realizes: that pit was not a setback at all; it was all **part of the journey**.

And that pit was what allowed Joseph not just to stand before Pharaoh, but to stand before him with humility which was probably why he was appointed viceroy....

Sometimes we find ourselves in the pit of life, and things all seem to be headed in the wrong direction. But there is always a bigger picture; we just don't usually get to see it. And though it may seem the wrong direction to us, Hashem is a pretty good navigator, and if we wait long enough, sometimes we get a glimpse of where that journey was really taking us.

They had told me, just before dismissing me, that although normally when a cadet is dismissed from Officer's course he is never allowed to return (having been found unworthy), in my case, given the circumstances, I would be allowed to repeat the entire course from the beginning; but I had only until Sunday morning to decide....

I thought they were nuts; and in that moment, could not imagine doing it all over again. But after a long tortuous weekend, I decided I had to try if only so I would not spend the rest of my life thinking 'I should have...'

Which was why, four months later, I finally found myself, nearly two years after first donning an IDF uniform, on the parade ground on that same base in the Negev desert, this time under a bright sun, squinting up at Moshe Levy, the IDF Chief of staff as I received my lieutenant's bars at last.

It would take a while longer, on a lonely stretch of road in Lebanon, before I finally started to glimpse why I needed those extra months in Officer's training and why sometimes 'good' was actually not good enough. But then, that's another story....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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