

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

Miketz

It was late, and normally he would have been on his way home, but he had some unfinished business at work, bringing him back up the hill late that night.

Very few people would even have noticed what he saw, much less done anything about it, but Aryeh, an expert in archeology, and very familiar with the normal comings and goings in East Jerusalem, realized something was going on: a long line of trucks was moving up and down the road, in and out of the Old City.

Arabs do not normally work late at night and certainly so many trucks would have to mean a major building project, which was strange considering the late hour. As it turned out, the Wakf (the Muslim religious authority on the Temple Mount) was overseeing an illegal expansion of the El Aksa Mosque on the Mount and needed somewhere to dump all the dirt and rubble they were digging up. And as any digging on the Temple Mount is illegal, they needed to do it without anyone noticing.

It took Aryeh a couple of hours to find a reporter willing to come out with a camera crew in the middle of the night, but his discovery, which has now become famous and a matter of public record, was nothing short of an archeological, historical earthquake.

Fifty trucks, over a period of nearly a month, simply dumped at least fifty (and some say as much as two hundred!) tons of earth and rubble, in at least three separate garbage sites in East Jerusalem.

Imagine: Earth that had been untouched since the Romans burned the second Temple two thousand years ago was dug up and simply dumped in valleys in the middle of the night!

For the previous fifteen years, in a valley in East Jerusalem, an archeological dig had been set up and volunteers from all over the world, under the guidance of Israeli archeologists, had been sifting through three thousand years of history.

Among the finds: a twenty-six-hundred-year-old Seal (clay stamp used to seal letters) with the Hebrew letters IMER (Aleph, Mem, Reish), a priestly (Kohanim) family name mentioned in the bible as serving in the Temple during the first Temple period!

And you can visit this valley in East Jerusalem and hold these stones and artifacts in your hand!

All of which leaves one wondering: how do hundreds of millions of Muslims continue to deny what is now so obviously historical fact? When archeologists have uncovered nearly fifty different seals in the City of David excavations, including that of *Baruch Ben Neriah*, the scribe and student of no less than Jeremiah himself, how can anyone doubt the incontestable Jewish historical connection to the land of Israel?

Is it a conscious decision to deny the truth? Or can so many people really convince themselves that what seems so obviously to be the case of the existence of an ancient Jewish State in what is today the state of Israel be impossible?

Make no mistake about it: this question is not limited to any one particular ethnicity, religion, or theology. How do hundreds of thousands of people still believe the Holocaust never happened? And how are there still people who believe that Stalin was a savior to the poor people of the world?

How do people look at the same scenario and see completely different realities? How, some thirty years and countless terror attacks, missile launches, and suicide (homicide) bombers after Oslo can some people remain convinced that Oslo could have and still might work, while others view it as the greatest calamity since the Holocaust?

To be sure, our purpose is not to take a particular political position, but rather to question how it is that we seem to become so ensconced in the positions we have taken.

This week's portion, *Miketz*, and its place in the story of Joseph and his brothers, presents us with a fascinating perspective on this question.

Sold by his brothers into slavery some twenty years earlier, Joseph, who has now taken the Egyptian name *Tzofnat-Paneach*, has, by Divine design, been elevated to the grand position of Viceroy of Egypt, the second most powerful position, in the most powerful empire the world had ever known.

In the midst of a devastating famine the brothers are forced to come to Egypt, standing before no less than the Viceroy himself, who unbeknownst to them, is the same Joseph they mercilessly sold into slavery all those years ago.

Joseph is presented with an incredible opportunity: the chance for a most delicious payback. But revenge does not seem to be on his mind and instead he orchestrates a series of puzzling events until eventually they find themselves opening their packs on the road to discover all the money they were meant to have paid (for the Egyptian Grain they were carrying) still in their possession. Are they being set up? Will they be accused of theft from the Egyptian crown (a crime punishable by death)?

"...And each said to his brother, my money has been returned and behold it is in my pack; and their hearts went out and they trembled, one to his brother saying: what is this G-d has done to us?" (Genesis (Bereishit) 42:28)

Clearly, the brothers see this as a calamity. The thought that the mightiest empire on the face of the Earth, the personification of evil that was ancient Egypt might now be hunting them is clearly cause for concern.

And yet, interestingly enough, they immediately seem to question no less than G-d himself! 'How could Hashem (G-d) do this to us?' is the question that immediately escapes their lips.

Considering that the brothers quite clearly still have guilt over having sold their brother into slavery years earlier, one would imagine they might consider this to be warranted due to their past behavior, instead of immediately questioning G-d?

Even more questionable, however, is not what the brothers do consider, but rather what they don't.

One wonders why it never occurs to the brothers that Joseph might be connected to the events at hand. How is it that when they are brought before Joseph none of them recognize their own brother whose face (being sold into slavery) must still haunt their dreams? And why is this Viceroy so interested in their father Yaakov, constantly asking if he is still alive? Why does this not arouse the brothers' curiosity?

Even more fascinating, all those years ago, Joseph tells the family of his dreams that the brothers' bushels are bowing to his, and that the moon, the sun and the stars are bowing before him, and this so outrages the brothers, it pushes them over the edge, causing them to nearly kill (and actually sell as a slave) their brother. Is this not a moment one would expect to be carried in their collective consciousness? And yet, here they are, bowing down together before a ruler they ought never to have met, and they do not even question whether Joseph might be involved?

And as if this is not enough, why would an Egyptian ruler accuse them of espionage, a charge with almost no basis, and then essentially let them go, simply to bring their brother back?

To top it all off, when the brothers return to Egypt with Binyamin, and are invited to the Viceroy's home for a feast (ibid. chap. 43), they are inexplicably seated in the precise order of their birth which, while causing the brothers to 'wonder' (42: 33), incredibly does not cause any of them to think Joseph might have something to do with it! Well, how on earth else would the Viceroy know the order of their birth?!

Yet, despite all of these indications, the brothers just go on about their business never questioning all of these events!

Indeed, the brothers are speechless with shock when Joseph finally reveals himself to them. Why is this so shocking? Why did not a single one of them see this coming?

Are we missing something? What is really going on here?

The Torah (*Shemot* (Exodus) 23:8) makes a point of saying, in discussing the prohibition against bribery of a judge: "...*For bribery blinds the eyes of the wise.*"

The Torah is suggesting that once bribed, a judge is no longer capable of seeing truthfully. No matter how clear justice might be, bribery warps his vision to the extent that he no longer is capable of seeing things the way they really are.

And this, perhaps, is the brothers' undoing. A long time ago they made an assumption, that Joseph's motivations were impure, that he was simply after their birthright, and that perhaps ego and greed were coloring his actions and flavoring his dreams.

To actually recognize that the assumption which forms the core of a person's entire life journey could be completely mistaken and that my entire life might be built on false premises takes an enormous amount of strength and great inner resolve, not to mention character.

Rare is the individual who is prepared to make such an admission, but this perhaps, is the level the Torah wants us to aspire to reach, in unraveling before us the human drama that is the story of Joseph and his brothers.

Despite all the obvious signs, the brothers simply cannot see the obvious solution to the mystery that confronts them. To do so is to admit that the dream has come true, and that they are in fact bowing to their own brother, and that would mean they were wrong, and their lives have been based on a completely flawed assumption.

And if Joseph is a *tzaddik*, then they are the villains, which is a very hard conclusion to draw.

We need look no farther than today's newspapers to find this lesson all around us.

If Oslo in 1993 was a failure, because we had no real partners, then that would mean all the death and violence since then was the result of that failure and we need to completely change directions, and that is a very hard pill to swallow. Far easier to keep trying the same experiment, no matter how strange that may seem, than admit such far-reaching errors.

And of course, this applies equally in our personal day to day lives.

If I am miserable as a lawyer because I chose the field for the wrong reasons then I might need to accept twenty years of mistakes, in order to make life better. And if the fellow or relative I am angry at actually had a point, then I might need to accept that I have been walking a path of behavior based on a completely mistaken assumption....

And it is no accident that the portion of *Miketz* always falls on the Shabbat of Chanukah: because this is the essence of what Chanukah was all about.

Too many Jews were living lives based on Greek assumptions that from a Jewish perception were completely flawed. And that may be why the festival of Chanukah is all about lighting the Menorah, because the solution to correcting flawed assumptions, is to hold them up to the light of impartial analysis, the light of objective truth, which from a Jewish perspective is the ancient and ever beautiful light of Torah.

Perhaps Chanukah affords us the opportunity to discover our mistakes, the strength to correct them and the courage to live life differently

Best wishes for a wonderful Chanukah, full of joy and light for all people everywhere,

Shabbat Shalom,

Binny Freedman