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5786 Parshat Vayeshev

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## תשפ"ו Parshat Vayeshev

This week's portion relates the events leading up to Yosef becoming the Viceroy of Egypt.

Hashem had told Avraham Avinu at the ברית בין הבתרים - *the covenant between the parts*--that his children would be slaves for 400 years in a foreign land. The kernel of the Jewish nation needed to spend time on foreign soil to become refined and to become amalgamated into the people that would receive the Torah and become the focal point of the world. The "count" began with Yitzchak's birth, and, after 168 years, Hashem decided that it was time to fulfill this decree. The place selected for this exile was Egypt, and, somehow, Yaakov and his family needed to relocate there to begin the process.

The Midrash tells us:

### מדרש תהלים - מזמור קה

אמר רבי יהודה בר נחמן בשם רבי שמעון בן לקיש: ראוי היה יעקב לירד למצרים בשלשלאות של ברזל ובקולרין, ועשה לו הקב"ה כמה עלילות וכמה מנגנאות ונמכר יוסף למצרים כדי לירד. ויהי רעב על הארץ, וכל כך למה, (שם מו, ו) ויבא יעקב מצרימה. אמר ר' פנחס הכהן בר חמא, משל לפרה אחת שהיו רוצין למשוך אותה למקולין שלה ולא היתה נמשכת. מה עשו, משכו בנה תחלה והיתה רצה אחריו. כך עשה הקב"ה מנגנאות, שעשו אחי יוסף כל אותן הדברים כדי שירדו למצרים גם כן כדי שירד גם יעקב, שנאמר (הושע יא, ד) בחבלי אדם אמשכם:

*Rabbi Yehuda son of Nachman said in the name of Reish Lakish: Yaakov should have been taken down to Egypt in iron chains, but Hashem made different pretenses so that he would go with dignity. Yosef was sold to Egypt, and then there was a famine in the land [of Israel]. Rabbi Pinchas HaCohen said: It's like the cow that would not go to slaughter. They led its son in front of it and it came running. Similarly, Hashem made*

*the pretense of having Yosef's brothers do what they did so that Yaakov would go down to Egypt.*

Viewing the saga of Yosef and his brothers from the Midrashic perspective, namely, that Yosef was merely a pawn to bring Yaakov down to Egypt, provides us with a profound insight into Jewish history. We learn that seemingly independent actions that people take and decisions that they make are all part of Hashem's master plan. The brothers did what they thought was correct and proper in their situation, which brought forth the fruition of Hashem's plan. Yosef, the "victim," himself expressed this very idea upon later revealing himself to his brothers when he told them (Genesis 45:5),

ה' וְעַתָּה אֵל תַּעֲצֹבוּ וְאַל יַחַר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם כִּי מִכַּרְתֶּם אֹתִי הִנֵּה כִּי לְמַחֲיָה שָׁלַחֲנִי  
אֱלֹקִים לְפָנֵיכֶם

*5) And now, do not be upset nor reproach yourselves for having sold me here, for it was to be a provider that Hashem has sent me ahead of you.*

"A greater purpose was at play here, and you, my brothers, were simply playing a role, the pawns, so to speak, in the process that would bring forth Hashem's master plan of providing food for you and our family." Yosef could not yet see the end of the story, but he explained the events invoking this same idea.

This seems contradictory. On the one hand, Hashem sent Yosef to Egypt to lure Yaakov down, and, unbeknownst to the brothers, all of their dealings with Yosef was the tool that Hashem used to bring forth that reality. On the other hand, the brothers tried and convicted Yosef as a רודף (*rodef* - one in the act of trying to kill an innocent person) who had forfeited his right to life and may be killed by anyone.

Because Yaakov had favored Yosef over his brothers, and because Yosef looked like he was trying to discredit his brothers to his father, the brothers suspected Yosef of trying to take over Yaakov's legacy and exclude them from being part of the future Jewish nation. Therefore, they considered Yosef a spiritual "rodef" one trying to "kill" their future as the foundational tribes of the Jewish nation.

Maimonides (Laws of Teshuva 5:1) raises a philosophical conundrum in the Jewish Religion.

אל יעבור במחשבתך דבר זה שאומרים טפשי אומה"ע ורוב גולמי בני ישראל שהקב"ה גוזר על האדם מתחלת ברייתו להיות צדיק או רשע אין הדבר כן אלא כל אדם ראוי לו להיות צדיק כמשה רבינו או רשע כירבעם

*It should not enter your mind that which the silly gentiles and most of the uneducated Jewish people say, that Hashem has decreed upon a person from his birth to be either a righteous or evil person. This is not so! Rather, every person is capable of being as righteous as Moshe Rabbeinu or as evil as Yiravam, the evil king of Israel.*

(ג) ודבר זה עיקר גדול הוא והוא עמוד התורה והמצוה שנאמר ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים וכתוב ראה אנכי נותן לפניכם היום כלומר שהרשות בידכם וכל שיחפוץ האדם לעשות ממעשה בני האדם עושה בין טובים בין רעים

*This matter is a fundamental pillar of the Torah and mitzvot, as it says (Deuteronomy 30:15), "See that I give before you life ... "That teaches us that the choice is in our hands and a person can do whatever he wants to, whether good or bad.*

Here is the conundrum:

שמא תאמר והלא הקב"ה יודע כל מה שיהיה וקודם שיהיה ידע שזה יהיה צדיק או רשע או לא ידע אם ידע שהוא יהיה צדיק אי אפשר שלא יהיה צדיק ואם

תאמר שידע שיהיה צדיק ואפשר שיהיה רשע הרי לא ידע הדבר על בריו דע  
שתשובת שאלה זו ארוכה מארץ מדה ורחבה מני ים וכמה עיקרים גדולים והררים  
רמים תלויים בה

*“Perhaps you will ask, “But Hashem knows all that will be even before it happens. Therefore, before I was even born, Hashem knew that I will be a tzadik or an evil person (so it seems pre-determined). Or perhaps, Hashem knows that I am going to be a tzadik, but in reality, I can choose to be evil, then Hashem really doesn’t know, and that cannot be.*

*“You should know that the answer to this question is longer than the face of the earth and deeper than the seas. And many great fundamentals and high mountains depend on it.”*

In summary, even though Hashem knows what choices we will make during our lifetimes as well as the outcome of those choices, He, nevertheless, does not influence those choices in any way. They are completely ours to make as we see fit, and we will reap their benefits, or suffer their consequences, both in this world and the World to Come.

This being the case, knowing what the brothers would choose to do with Yosef, Hashem used their freedom of choice to bring forth the desired outcome of Yaakov going down to Egypt. Although, as humans, we are unable to understand things from Hashem’s perspective, the reality is that despite Hashem knowing what we will choose, it does not influence our freedom of choice in any way.

This is a very inspiring and empowering thought. Indeed, quite possibly, a decision that we make in the everyday challenges of our life, Hashem will harness to accomplish a vital mission for the Jewish people.

In other words, Hashem has placed me in the world, *now*, knowing that the decisions that I will make will be vital to the interests and goals that Hashem has for the world. Hashem, knowing that I will make the correct decisions, has placed me here as His tool to accomplish His goals.

Yosef knew this concept and well understood that Hashem was guiding all that happened to him. He saw Hashem's hand in everything that happened to him and thus stayed connected to Him. This was Yosef's *modus operandi*, and this understanding is what sustained him in the godless country Egypt during his 22-year exile from his holy father and family. He clearly understood that Hashem's guiding hand was at play at every juncture of his journey, and he was grateful for the opportunity to be Hashem's tool to accomplish His intentions.

A careful examination of the story reveals where Yosef saw Hashem's love and involvement with him.

The lesson began with Yosef finding his brothers. Yaakov had sent him to Shechem where his brothers were shepherding the sheep, to check up on them, them and bring back a report. They had, however, by then left Shechem and Yosef was at a loss to find them. Then (37:15)

טו) וַיִּמְצְאוּהוּ אִישׁ וְהָיָה תַּעֲהָ בַשָּׂדֶה וַיִּשְׁאַלְהוּ הָאִישׁ לְאֹמֶר מַה תִּבְקֶשׁ

*15) A man discovered him and behold! He was wandering in the field; the man asked him, saying, "What do you seek?"*

Yosef told the man that he was looking for his brothers. When the man told him that he overheard them saying that they were going to Dotan, Yosef went there and found them.

Who was this "man" who happened to be in the right place at the right time and knew the exact information that Yosef needed? Rashi

quotes the Midrash, which tells us it was the angel Gavriel. Hashem had planted him there to send Yosef into the lion's mouth, into the hands of his plotting brothers. Yosef, of course, realized that this had to be Hashem's will. Even though he didn't realize that his interlocuter was an angel, he certainly realized that the chances of meeting someone who could help him find his brothers were extremely rare. Hence, this was obviously guided by Hashem, so Yosef put his full trust in Hashem and relied on Him completely.

When the brothers threw Yosef into the pit, the Torah says (37:24).

(כד) וַיִּקְחֵהוּ וַיִּשְׁלֹכוּ אֹתוֹ הַבְּרֶךְ וְהַבּוֹר רֶק אֵין בּוֹ מַיִם

*25) And they took him and cast him into a pit. And the pit was empty; there was no water in it.*

The Talmud inquires after the redundancy. If the pit was empty, why does it say, "there was no water in it?" Doesn't empty mean nothing in it at all? "No," the Talmud answers. "Empty" in this case means empty of water; but there were many other things in it, such as snakes and scorpions (which the brothers could not see).

Can you imagine being thrown into a pit where you are lunch for snakes and scorpions? How terrifying! But Yosef survived without sustaining a single bite. Yosef realized that Hashem was right down there with him in the bottom of the pit keeping the snakes and scorpions at bay.

A man once approached a rabbi and begged him to speak to his drug-addicted son who had tried to kill himself three times. The rabbi asked, "What can I say to your son that will make a difference to him?" The father pleaded with the rabbi to please try anyway, that maybe

something will come to him. The rabbi didn't know what he would say, but, after much pestering, he agreed.

He told the young man, "You know, Hashem loves you!" Enraged by the rabbi's words, the son retorted, "Look at me! I am a drug addict and live a miserable life. You have the gall to tell me that Hashem *loves* me? Is this how you treat someone you love!?"

The rabbi responded, "I'll prove it to you. You tried to kill yourself three times, and you were unsuccessful. Obviously, Hashem has a need for you, or you wouldn't be here." The boy couldn't deny the depth and wisdom of the rabbi's words and turned his life around.

After fetching Yosef from the pit, his brothers sold him to a caravan of Yishmaelim who were transporting spices, balsam, and lotus. This threw Yosef into an even deeper turmoil. In the pit, at least, a chance passer-by might rescue him. Indeed, Reuven had actually intended to retrieve him after the other brothers had left. But his having been sold to a caravan of Yishmaelim, who knows where he would end up? As a slave in someone's house who knows where? What would be the chance of him ever reuniting with his father?

But when Yosef smelled the caravan's spices, he realized that Hashem was with him there, too. Usually, Yishmaelim carry petroleum and smelly tar, yet this transport was hauling sweet smelling spices! How unusual! "Hashem is sending me a signal that he is here with me as well, and I will be okay."

Remaining deeply connected to Hashem even in the most difficult times was the source of Yosef's success in everything that he did. Yosef also merited that through Hashem's connection to him, others saw and recognized the reality of Hashem.

The Midrash (Tanchuma Vayeshev 8) on the verse (39:3) informs us:

ג) וַיֵּרָא אֲדֹנָיו כִּי יִדְוֹד אֶתֹו וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר הוּא עֹשֶׂה יִדְוֹד מִצְּלִיחַ בְּיָדוֹ

*“His master saw that Hashem was with him, and whatever he did Hashem made succeed in his hand,”*

וירא אדוניו כי ה' אתו וגו' וכי פוטיפר רשע היה רואה שהקב"ה עמו ומה הוא כי ה' אתו? אלא שלא היה שמו של הקב"ה זז מפיו! היה נכנס לשמשו והוא היה מלחש ואומר רבון העולם אתה הוא בטחוני אתה הוא פטרוני תנני לחן ולחסד ולרחמים בעיניך ובעיני כל רואי ובעיני פוטיפר אדוני ופוטיפר אומר לו מה אתה מלחש שמא בשפים אתה עושה לי והוא משיבו לא אלא אני מתפלל שאמצא חן בעיניך

*How could Potifar, an evil man, see Hashem with Yosef? He saw that Hashem's name never left Yosef's lips. When Yosef entered to serve him, he would mumble and say, “Hashem, You are all I have to depend on, please let me find favor in the eyes of my master.” Once, Potifar asked him, “What are you saying? Are you mumbling witchcraft on me?” Yosef answered, “I am praying to find favor in your eyes.”*

Because Yosef was always connected to Hashem, he credited Hashem for all his successes. We see this in every one of the Torah's quotations of Yosef.

As the prison warden, Yosef noticed the concerned and depressed looks on the faces of two of the other prisoners, Pharaoh's chamberlains, the cup bearer and the baker. When they told him of their disconcerting dreams, Yosef's response was (40:8):

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף, "הֲלוֹא לְאֱלֹקִים פְּתַרְנִים! סִפְרוּ נָא לִי"

8) *And he said to them, “Do not interpretations belong to Hashem? Relate it to me if you please.”*

When, later (next week!), Pharaoh had two consecutive dreams that none of his wise men or advisors could satisfactorily interpret, the cup bearer remembered that Yosef had perfectly interpreted his and the baker’s dreams. He told Pharaoh that events had transpired exactly as Yosef had predicted: Three days after the dreams, Pharaoh restored the cup bearer to his former position, and the baker was killed. Yosef had asked cup bearer to tell Pharaoh that he was in prison for no crime, but upon achieving his freedom, he promptly forgot. Pharaoh’s dreams reminded him of Yosef.

Two years had passed, and Yosef saw no end to his imprisonment. Suddenly, he was fetched from his cell, cleaned up, given a shave and suitable clothing, and was whisked before the king, who needed him to interpret his dreams. The chamberlain had finally come through. Under these circumstances, one would think that Yosef would want to impress the king with his great wisdom and ability. But when the king said to Yosef, “I hear that you know how to interpret dreams,” Yosef responded (45:16) with,

טז) וַיַּעַן יוֹסֵף אֶת פַּרְעֹה לֵאמֹר בְּלִעְדֵי אֱלֹקִים יַעֲנֶה אֶת שְׁלוֹם פַּרְעֹה

16) *And Yosef answered Pharaoh saying, “It has nothing to do with me, Hashem will answer Pharaoh’s need.”*

In front of Pharaoh, who had made a deity of himself, Yosef deflected all the attention from himself to Hashem, using the opportunity to explain that despite his being under Pharaoh’s jurisdiction and control, Yosef believes in Hashem. That takes guts, or piety. Yet for

Yosef, who lived with Hashem, there was no other way. This was the reality –Hashem does it all.

This is a very powerful lesson. Yosef maintained his deep connection to Hashem through the darkest of times because he understood that what was happening to him was part of a much greater picture.

The Chofetz Chaim (d. 1933) would give the following parable to illustrate the concept.

One Shabbat morning after services, a visitor approached the *gabbai* (the person who decides who gets called to the Torah and in which order) and asked him the following question:

“I noticed that when you call people to the Torah you have no system. You call up men seemingly randomly from different places throughout the shul. Why don’t you go in order of how they sit so that every man will get called the same number of times throughout the year?”

The gabbai answered, “Please understand that you are a guest here and so you don’t see the whole picture. Each person whom I called this morning had a specific reason why he needed to get called to the Torah. One had yahrzeit, the other one had a simcha, etc. If you would be here for a whole year you would see how, through the course of the year, everyone gets called to the Torah.”

Similarly, we come to this world for roughly 70-80 years and we want to understand how Hashem operates it. Why is there so much antisemitism? Why is this person suffering? Why did this happen or that? The questions have no end. But we are able to see only a small part of the picture. Hashem’s calculations began at the beginning of time and

continue until the end of time. He is placing each piece of the puzzle in its proper place to complete the picture. As with all puzzles, many pieces look weird or have no discernable image on them; but when put into their proper spot in the puzzle, not only do they take on meaning, but they also complete the picture for the other often unidentifiable puzzle pieces. As Hashem told to Job, “Were you here when I created the world?”

An adherent of the Bardichever Rebbe was having a very difficult time dealing with tragic events that were happening that made no sense to him. Through his spiritual intuition (רוח הקודש), the rebbe told his adherent to go to a specific meadow at the edge of town and to hide behind the large tree there and report back to him what he saw.

After waiting behind the tree for a few hours, the fellow heard the hoofs of a galloping horse approaching. He soon saw a nobleman riding a horse coming down a path. Suddenly, the nobleman stopped his horse, dismounted and bent over to take a drink from a stream that ran close to the path at that point. After the nobleman left, the fellow noticed a white money sack filled with coins on the ground where the nobleman had bent over to drink. It had apparently fallen out of his cloak as he drank the water.

A short time later, the fellow once again heard the sounds of a galloping horse coming down the path. This rider, a simple man, also noticed the stream close to the bank and stopped his horse in the same spot for a drink. As he dismounted, he discovered the sack of coins sitting on the ground. He looked all around and after seeing that nobody was around to claim it, and after taking his drink, he took it and left.

A short time later a third horseman came down the same path and stopped for a drink at the same spot. As he was drinking, the sound of

hoofs coming from the other direction could be heard. It was the nobleman who had by then discovered that his precious money was missing and realized that he lost it when he took his drink. He was returning to reclaim it when he found the third man taking his drink from the stream. Assuming that this was the first person to visit that same spot and, with the money gone, deciding further that this person must have taken it, the nobleman shouted,

“Where is my money?!!!”

“I don’t know what you are talking about. What money?” said the hapless man.

“The sack that was here on the ground when you came. I lost it! What did you do with it? Give it back to me, it is mine!!” exclaimed the nobleman.

“There was no sack here when I came, I don’t know what you are talking about.” said the fellow.

At this point the nobleman accused the man of being a liar and started beating him to coerce him to return the sack of money. When a substantial beating did not bring forth an admission, the nobleman realized that he must be telling the truth and left him alone, leaving without his money.

The adherent watched as the poor beaten man, who had no clue what had just happened to him, pulled himself together, got on his horse, and rode away.

After seeing what he was sure the rebbe wanted him to see, the man went directly to the rebbe to give his report.

After relating the events as they transpired, the rebbe asked him, “Nu, so what did you learn?”

“I have no clue what that was about,” responded the adherent.

“Let me explain,” said the rebbe. “In a previous life, the nobleman was the business partner of the second fellow and had swindled him out of a lot of money. The money had to go back from the thief to the proper owner. That is the reason the nobleman lost the money, and the other fellow found it. The nobleman owed it to him.

“But what about the third fellow?” asked the adherent. “Why did he get the beating? He was just an innocent person in the wrong place at the wrong time?”

“Not quite! He was the crooked judge that decided the case in favor of the nobleman. He deserved the beating he got,” answered the rebbe. “You see, Hashem is keeping track of all of man’s actions and dealing with them for generations and generations. We cannot know His calculations, what caused what to happen, or what results our actions will trigger. These matters may span many generations and are beyond the scope of a human being to comprehend. What we do know is that we can trust Hashem, knowing that everything that He does is for our benefit and is perfect.”

Returning to the puzzle metaphor: What picture is displayed on the box of the puzzle that Hashem is completing? What will the completed image look like?

It will, so to speak, be a picture of Hashem. Not that Hashem has an image that we can perceive, but in our mind’s eye we will see that there is no other force or source in the world other than Hashem. We

will recognize with complete clarity that only Hashem is real, and that, without Him, nothing else can exist.

This is what we mean when we say (Zecharia 14:9) in our prayers,

ט) וְהָיָה יְדוּד לְמֶלֶךְ עַל כָּל הָאָרֶץ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יְהִיָּה יְדוּד אֶחָד וְשֵׁמוֹ אֶחָד

*9) And Hashem will be the king of the whole world, on that day, Hashem and His name will be one.*

*On that day* refers to the day that Mashiach comes. Then, the entire world will recognize Hashem as the only one G-d over the entire creation.

The Chofetz Chaim draws another parallel from the story of Yosef to the time Mashiach will come.

When the brothers came down to Egypt to purchase food during the seven years of famine, they encountered nothing but trouble from the viceroy (Yosef) who accused them of being spies. Yosef recognized them and deliberately gave them problems at every turn. The climax came when Binyamin was found with the viceroy's personal goblet in his saddle bag, the consequences of which were that he would have to be a slave to the viceroy, never to return to his father, something that was unthinkable. With Yosef, the other son of Rachel assumed dead, Binyamin was all that Yaakov had left from his beloved wife, Rachel. If the brothers returned without him, Yaakov was sure to die of grief.

At this point, the Midrash tells us that Yehuda and the brothers threatened to tear Egypt apart if they don't get Binyamin back. Seeing his brothers go to bat so valiantly for their brother Binyamin brought tears to Yosef's eyes, whereupon he broke down and revealed his true identity to his brothers. His revelation comprised only two words – אֲנִי

יִסְרָאֵל “I am Yosef!” With these two words, in one second, the brothers understood the reason behind all of their trials and tribulations. Everything fell into place for them about how Yosef had dealt with them, and all their questions were answered.

Similarly, when Mashiach comes, and Hashem reveals Himself to the world, saying “I am Hashem!” we will all understand in retrospect how everything that Hashem did, including the difficult times, was a positive and essential step necessary to bring the Mashiach. When we are *in* the process, we cannot see the role each event is playing and how it affects the outcome. But after the Mashiach comes, we will understand it, perfectly. May we merit that great day speedily in our times!!