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Your Mistakes Can Propel You Higher

After interpreting the dream of the Chamberlain of the Cupbearers, Josef told him, “If only you would think of me with yourself when he benefits you, and you will do me a kindness, if you please, and mention me to Pharaoh, when you would get me out of this building.” Famous Torah commentaries, the *Seder Olam*, *Tanchuma* and *Shemos Rabbah* comment that Josef was punished an extra two years in prison for this statement, for a lack of trust in God. This is quite astounding as

we have a mandate to do our best effort in procuring the best outcome for our future.

Lesson:

There are so many rich lessons packed into this week’s Torah portion. Josef had been thrown into a pit by his own brothers, sold as a slave, and then thrown in jail for resisting a lewd temptation. While in jail, he saw that the Chamberlain of the Cupbearers and the Chamberlain of the Bakers were aggrieved. Was Josef not also aggrieved? Was he not angry and bitter from all the torment and distress that had befallen him? He asked them, “Why do you appear downcast today?”

If you are downcast yourself, wallowing in your own misery, it is nearly impossible to recognize and go beyond yourself to first recognize someone else’s misery and then offer help. Josef did just this but only because he himself was not downcast. How is it possible to have gone through such travails and not become bitter?

The key is because He saw God guiding him, lovingly, throughout each turn and therefore could remain in a positive state of mind and heart. Through it all, Josef had perfect and complete trust in God. In fact, the Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 89:3) tells us that Josef placed his complete trust in God, and ironically enough, *this* is the reason that Josef is ‘punished’ an extra two years. For someone like Josef, even a small dependence on anyone beyond God showed a lack of faith.

While for us, this would be the opposite, we have a mandate to utilize every opportunity, to do our very best effort to optimize the best outcome. For

someone like Josef, however, it was seen as a negative. *However, it was this 'punishment' that was the platform through which Josef could rise to viceroy.* It was the so-called 'punishment' that allowed his success to come to fruition.

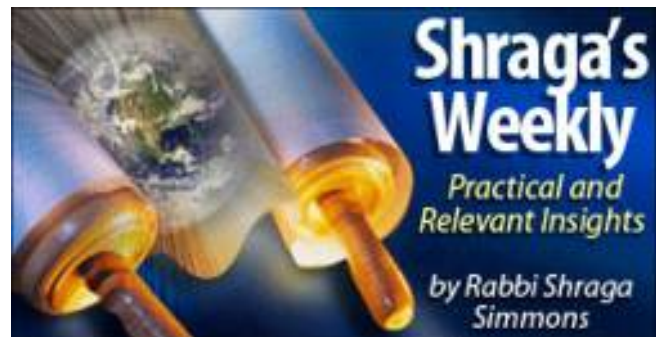
During those two extra years that Josef spent in jail, Pharaoh has summoned everyone to try to interpret his dreams. And, during those two years, people from near and far had come to try. After the two-year time, everyone who could have tried to interpret Pharaoh's dream already had. They had exhausted every single person. Pharaoh, even more distraught that he was still left with these dreams and with no one else to interpret them, was desperate. As such, when the Chamberlain of the Cupbearers told him about Josef in a disparaging manner: young, a slave, and an Israelite, Pharaoh immediately had him taken out of jail, and Josef interpreted the dreams correctly along with a plan of action.

Had Josef interpreted the dreams earlier, before everyone or anyone else then someone could have exclaimed to Pharaoh that they were about to tell him the exact same thing! Josef is not great, he just got to Pharaoh first. By Josef being in jail the additional two years, it allowed Pharaoh to recognize that only Josef held the answer, leading to his liberation and rise to viceroy.

As humans, we make mistakes and sometimes have regrets. While we do not always see it, God created the world such that sometimes the consequences of our mistakes can actually be the very thing that allows our greatness to come to fruition. Often times we categorize things as good or bad. With a child, you listen you get rewarded,

you don't, you get punished; but God does not relate to us this way. This is such a beautiful and deep concept: God could have led to Josef's greatness in a way completely unrelated to his punishment. But its amazing to have a Creator Who in His abundant mercy created a world where the consequences of our mistakes can be the platforms to propel us to even greater heights.

Exercise: Think of something that you regret. Now try to let it go, knowing that God in His abundant mercy and love can propel you to new heights through it.



Exile and Return (part 1)

This week's parsha features the famous story of Joseph being sold by his jealous brothers. Joseph is sent down to Egypt, where the Jewish people wind up spending a few hundred years in brutal slavery.

In some odd way it seems that the whole tragedy of Joseph's sale was destined to occur from the start. Consider:

1. Jacob clearly provokes his other sons by showing special favoritism toward Joseph, particularly by giving him the coat of

many colors (Genesis 37:3). This behavior is especially strange for the wizened patriarch Jacob.

2. Joseph stirs his brothers' animosity by delivering a bad report about them. (37:2)
3. When Joseph has a dream indicating his eventual rule over his brothers, he incites them further by telling them the dream (37:5).
4. After a second, similar dream, Joseph again angers his brothers by recounting the dream (37:9). Joseph then compounds their anger by retelling the dream to his father – in front of the brothers (37:10)!
5. Jacob, though knowing that relations are highly strained, nevertheless sends Joseph to check on the brothers' activities and report back. Despite the obvious danger, Joseph agrees – and goes alone (37:13). It is then that the brothers throw Joseph into a pit and sell him as a slave.

As puzzling as it sounds, this series of provocations seems like an intentional effort by Jacob and Joseph to stir the brothers' hatred and set into motion the chain of events in Egypt. How can this possibly be?

Engraining Trust

To answer, let's backtrack about 100 years:

In Genesis 15:7-8, God promises Abraham that he and his descendants will possess the Land of Israel. To which Abraham responds, "How do I know it's true?"

This remark seems entirely out of line. Imagine a father promising his child, "I'll take you to the ball game on Sunday," to which the child responds, "Can I really trust you'll do it?"

Abraham was on a lofty spiritual level (after all, he's talking with God). Yet his comment of "How will I know?" was an unbecoming way to seek reassurance from God. For that reason, God decreed that before the birth of the Jewish nation, they would need to undergo an experience to engrain a greater trust in God into their spiritual genetics.

The remedy, God tells Abraham, is to be enslaved in Egypt (Genesis 15:14). There the Jews will come to realize that only God can save them. They will turn to God with a total heart and cry out. Only then redemption will occur.

Generations later, that is precisely what transpired: "The Jews cried out because of their slavery... God heard their cries and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." (Exodus 2:23-24)

The Jews had built a new level of trust in God. Egyptian slavery had served its purpose.

The Hebron Plan

We can now understand why Jacob and Joseph went out of their way to provoke the brothers. The Egypt experience was inevitable, and they were setting that process of exile into motion.

This is alluded to in Genesis 37:14, where Jacob sends Joseph to check on the brothers from the "depths of Hebron." At first glance, this makes no sense, for as anyone who has visited Israel knows,

Hebron is located not in a valley but in the Judean hills! (see Joshua 14:12) The Talmud (Sotah 11a) explains: When the Torah says the "DEPTHS of Hebron," it means figuratively that Joseph was sent from the "PROFOUND" plan involving Abraham (who is buried in Hebron). The sale of Joseph is an extension of the process set into motion with Abraham questioning God.

In fact, the Zohar reports that before sending Joseph to check the brothers' activities (the act that would lead directly to Joseph's going down to Egypt), Jacob first visited Abraham's grave in Hebron.

The process of exile was destined to happen one way or another. Jacob and Joseph helped orchestrate it thusly. In fact, during those crucial moments before meeting the brothers, God sent the angel Gabriel to encourage Joseph along! As the Midrash says, if things hadn't worked out this way, Jacob would have eventually been dragged down to Egypt in chains.

Life Lessons

And process of descent is a lesson for us today. Our soul comes to Earth in the first place because we have crucial life lessons to learn – "something we have to go through." The Kabbalists describe this as "Tikkun" – rectification of one's soul, based on mistakes of past lives, rooted in the original mistake of Adam and Eve.

This does not suggest that we should go out of our way to seek difficulties. But if there is a necessary process to undergo, it is foolish to avoid. Too often we busy ourselves with petty distractions, in hopes of escaping the painful confrontation with

reality. But it invariably catches up with us; that "difficulty" is part and parcel of our reason for being.

It's all part of God's grand eternal plan. If you have an issue, confront it. Work it through. Build your "trust muscles." God put you in this situation for good reason, and only He can safely get you out of it. God is in control, and He delivers.



Hatred and Peace

In this week's *parashah*, we read the story of Joseph's betrayal by his brothers. This is one of those vexing, painful incidents that are difficult to comprehend. How can brothers be so callous? How can they be so cruel? By closely examining this passage from the Torah, we can gain some insight.

The Torah states, "They saw him [Joseph]) from afar, and when he had not yet approached them they conspired against him to kill him."¹ The words "from afar" and "he had not yet approached" seem to be redundant. It would apparently have sufficed to say, "... they conspired against him." Why stress that he had not yet approached?

Hatred can only prevail in hearts where there is no communication. The brothers saw him from a distance because *they did not allow him to approach them*: it's easier to condemn, resent, and hate from afar. This distancing was the tragedy that led to the betrayal of Joseph by his brethren.

To prevent such deterioration in relationships, the Torah commands us, "You shall not hate your brother in your heart,"² calling upon us to resolve our differences and not allow animosity and hatred to fester within us. Let's try to apply this teaching to our personal lives; let us communicate in an amicable and civilized manner with those against whom we harbor resentment. We must do this, not only for the sake of others, but more - for our own sake. When jealousy and hatred are permitted to overtake us, they can literally consume us and render us bitter, angry people who not only destroy others, but more significantly, destroy ourselves.

If we wish to eliminate the rivalries and controversies (as subtle as they may be) in our own families, we have to learn to communicate with respect, "judge each person favorably"[3] and give them the benefit of the doubt. After all, isn't that what we wish others to do for us? Focus on their redeeming qualities rather than on their character flaws, and you will find that life will be more pleasant and relationships more rewarding.

THE MANY FACES OF SHALOM

In this week's *parashah*, the word *shalom* is mentioned several times, and, we detect different dimensions of the word. *Shalom* means *greeting*, *shalom* means *peace*, *shalom* means *welfare* or

wellbeing, and its Hebrew letters also connote *complete*, as in the word *shalem*, whole.

In this *parashah*,⁴ we find that the brothers of Joseph hated him and could not speak to him "*l'shalom*," peaceably, which literally translates, "to peace." Moreover, in this passage, we note the elision of the word *shalom*, which is spelled here without the letter *vav*. There are many lessons that we can derive from this. If we want to attain peace in our relationships, we have to take steps toward peace, hence "*to peace*," and each little step becomes part of the mosaic until *completion* - *shalem* - *total peace* is attained. Because the brothers hated Joseph, they could not even take the first small step: they could not even greet him.

Without the *vav*, the *gematria* of the word *l'shalom* - to peace - is 400, which is equal to the value of *ayin ra* - an evil eye. The brothers looked upon Joseph with an evil eye, unable to see the good in him or to interpret his actions favorably. On the other hand, when the Patriarch Jacob/Israel said that he intended to send Joseph to his brothers in Shechem, Joseph responded, "*Hineni* - here I am." Jacob charges Joseph with looking into the welfare of his brethren; once again the word *shalom* is used, but this time, the word is spelled fully,⁵ teaching us that Jacob instructed Joseph to seek completeness in his brethren and disregard their flaws - and Joseph was ready to do his bidding. It's all in our hands: Will we look at one another with an "evil eye" or will we see "wholeness"? Obviously, it's much easier to see another's faults, but the challenge is to search for the goodness, for the positive attributes in each person. How we judge others

speaks volumes about our own character. Let us kindle the lights of love and compassion in our hearts.

THE VENOM OF HATRED

Through this *parashah* we can understand the terrible consequences of jealousy and animosity, which, if allowed to go unchecked, can lead to such intense hatred that even simple communication becomes impossible. Our Sages tell us that when Joseph greeted his brothers, saying "*Shalom*," they mocked his greeting, but when he remained silent, they jeered, saying, "He does not even say '*Shalom*.'" This teaches us that, in face of jealousy and hatred, nothing that one does is right. On the other hand, when love is present, there is always a willingness to look away and forgive.

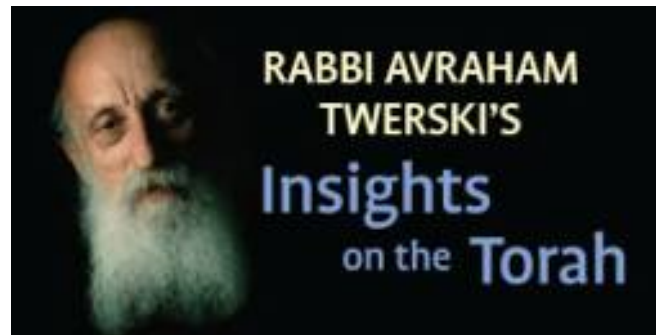
A further manifestation of jealousy and hatred is evidenced when the elderly Jacob is told, "Identify, if you please: Is it *your son's* tunic or not?"⁶ The brothers' hatred was so intense that they couldn't bear to pronounce Joseph's name. To prevent such destructive deterioration in our relationships, let us be careful to refer to others by their names and see them as real people rather than as impersonal objects: "he" or "she."

Our mother, Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis, has often related that very often, in troubled families who come to her for consultation, hostile children simply cannot pronounce the words, "my mother" and "my father," but insist on referring to their parents as "she" or "he." There is a world of difference between the two. When you say, "my mother" or "my father," you are acknowledging that no matter what, whether you see eye to eye or

not, you are connected ... you know that they care for you and are concerned for your welfare. But when parents become *she's* or *he's*, they are transformed into objects that have no bearing upon your life.

Monitor yourself: How do you refer to the members of *your* family? Enhance your relationships through the simple exercise of referring to them by name. It is not by coincidence that when Hashem expresses his love for the Patriarch Abraham and for Moses our teacher, He repeats their names.

1. Genesis 37:18.
2. Leviticus 19:17.
3. Ethics of the Fathers 1:6.
4. Genesis 37:4.
5. *Ibid.* 37:13-14.
6. *Ibid.* 37:32.



The Connection between being Grateful and Confessing

Judah recognized and he said, "She is right. It is from me" (38:26)

The Midrash lauds Judah's courage in admitting that he was the father of Tamar's child because he could easily have denied it. The Midrash states that Judah received this trait from his mother,

Leah, because when he was born, she said, “This time let me gratefully praise God” (Genesis 29:35; Bereishis Rabbah 71). The Hebrew word for “giving thanks,” *hodaah*, is also the word for “confess.” Leah was indeed grateful, but we do not find her confessing anything. Although the same word has two meanings, how does Judah's ability to confess derive from his mother's ability to be grateful?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch frequently points out that words that are similar are somehow related. This must be more so when the words for two different concepts are identical.

There is a very profound relationship between the ability to confess and the ability to be grateful. Both are the result of self-esteem.

Many people have difficulty in expressing gratitude, because it makes them feel obligated and beholden to their benefactor. This psychological truth is clearly stated in the Talmud (Avodah Zarah 5a). The resistance to express gratitude appears to be innate. A mother may tell her five-year-old child, “Say ‘thank you’ to the nice man for the candy,” but the child may only grunt. A person with low self-esteem sees being beholden to anyone as a dependency on others, and considers being dependent as demeaning. He may not only be resistant to express gratitude, but may also turn off any awareness of gratitude. A mature person with good self-esteem is not threatened by feeling gratitude. He can take appropriate dependency in stride.

This also holds true for the ability to confess a wrong. A person with low self-esteem is apt to deny having done wrong. He may not admit a

misdeed even to himself, let alone to others.

Confessing a wrong can be crushing. A person with good self-esteem, on the other hand, realizes that even the finest human being may err, and he may have little difficulty in confessing.

When I lecture on self-esteem, people invariably ask, “What can we do to help our children build their self-esteem?” My answer is that the first thing is to have good self-esteem yourself. Self-esteem is contagious. Parents who feel positive about themselves provide an atmosphere where the child can feel positive. Parents with low self-esteem act in a way that transmits negative feelings to their children.

Leah had reason to have low self-esteem. Jacob preferred her sister to her, and she had participated in deceiving him. When the Torah says that God saw that Leah was despised (Genesis 29:31) it does not mean that Jacob despised her. The patriarch did not despise his wife. It means that Leah despised herself for participating in the deception. The names Leah gave her first three children all indicate how poorly she felt about herself. By the time she bore Judah, her self-esteem had improved to the point where she could express gratitude. She transmitted her positivity to Judah, who was, therefore, able to confess.

The Midrash that equates the ability to be grateful with the ability to confess is teaching us an important psychological concept: self-esteem enables a person both to be grateful and to confess a wrong.