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## God's Consent

In this week's Torah portion, Joseph's true identity is finally revealed to his brothers. Until then, Joseph's brothers do not know that the seemingly cruel and unfair Viceroy is none other than their own brother who they sold as a slave decades prior.

Joseph's words, "I am Joseph" send his brothers for whirlwind; his brothers shrank in shame. This would have been the perfect time for Joseph to tell them, "Look what you did! God thwarted your evil plans and rewarded me for all the

travails by making me viceroy!" But Joseph responded in such a way that we can all learn from. Joseph lovingly tells them:

"After which Joseph lovingly told them, "Come close to me, if you please." He continues, "I am Joseph your brother – it is me, whom you sold into Egypt. And now, be not distressed, nor reproach yourselves for having sold me here, for it was to be a provider that God sent me ahead of you...And now, it was not you who sent me here, but God..."

Imagine Joseph's story – he acquiesces his father's request of checking on his brothers, and instead of being met with brotherly love is thrown into a pit and subsequently sold into slavery, and eventually imprisoned for twelve years. Joseph sees his brothers for the first time after the incident and could have very justifiably blame them. *Because of you I encountered all this hardship and underwent so much anguish and distress. I didn't do anything to you!*

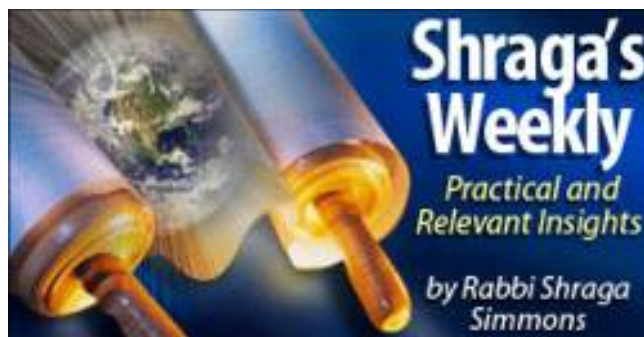
But Joseph shifts the perspective away from the brothers and straight to God. "It was not you who sent me here, but God."

What a beautiful perspective. Once one concludes that no one can do *anything* to you without God's consent then there is no reason to be angry at that person. Not only does Joseph not try to get even one iota of an apology, not even a small guilt trip, but rather tells them not to distress, that they were nothing more than tools in God's hands.

Our toddler does not listen to us, our spouse says something insensitive, a friend forgets to invite us to a party, the car in back of us honks for no apparent reason. These are all things that could send someone into a fury of annoyance and anger. However, when we realize that whatever is happening to us is directly from God, and who it comes from is irrelevant, then there is no reason to get upset.

We instead turn to God and ask, “Ok, God. I hear You. The person in back of me is honking, is there some area in my life where I’m moving too slowly?” Our toddler does not listen to us, we can ask ourselves if we listen to others and to God. Instead of making the focus about the other person and how you were treated, we use each experience as a growing opportunity and relieve ourselves of any anger and frustration. When we do this, we can truly see God’s loving hand guiding us exactly to where we need to be, eventually leading us to a beautifully high role, just as God did to Joseph.

Exercise: When we want to blame someone else for something, remember that they are God’s messengers. Tell God that you know it is from Him, and ask God to help you figure out what you can learn from the situation.



### Exile and Return (part 3)

At the end of last week's parsha, Mikeitz, things were looking grim. Joseph – having not yet revealed his true identity – had accused his brothers of theft and spying, and Benjamin was about to be arrested and imprisoned. Joseph has the brothers on the ropes and they're going down for the 10-count.

Then Parshat Mikeitz abruptly ends.

#### The Story Continues

As the story resumes in Parshat Vayigash, the Jewish world is crumbling further: Yehudah threatens to send his brothers on a violent rampage if this Egyptian Prime Minister (i.e. Joseph) doesn't stop his oppressive tactics.

At this very moment – with the brothers toe-to-toe, locked in an explosive impasse – Joseph reveals himself as their long-lost brother. With three words, "I am Joseph" (Genesis 45:3), everything now becomes clear. The previous 22 years of doubt and suffering were all worth it, "all part of God's master plan," says Joseph. The reunited brothers hug, and all's well that ends well.

Rabbi Zev Leff asks: Why did the previous parsha have to end with such a cliffhanger? Why didn't the Torah simply extend Parshat Mikeitz a few more verses and include the resolution of this story? Why do we have to wait a whole week to find out what happens?!

Recall how this entire sequence of events began: Joseph was estranged from his brothers, sold into slavery, then consigned to an Egyptian dungeon. He rises to prominence, positioned to save his family from a devastating famine – and even gets the brothers to bow as a fulfillment of his earlier dreams.

More than any other biblical account, this story illustrates how "everything turns out good in end." In order to drive home the lesson, the Torah makes us wait one week to find out the ending!

In a sense this is the story of our own lives as well. We work, we plan, we struggle – and things often end up a mess. The righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. How do the pieces of this puzzle possibly fit together?

The premise for this question stems from a limited perspective. We often imagine that the world began when we're born, and ends when we die. Everything beforehand is lumped together as "ancient history." If we can't understand it today, we conclude that it makes no sense at all.

In truth, we are here on Earth for only a short time. We cannot see the "Big Picture." We don't know all the details that happened beforehand, and we certainly don't know what will happen after we're gone. It's unfair to take a single event out of context and question what appears to be

injustice. We might not see the answer immediately; we might not even see it in our lifetime.

Perhaps that's why older people possess a special wisdom – through the perspective of time, they've seen how seemingly unrelated events connect together.

### **From Darkness To Light**

Paradoxically, it is often when things look the most grim that they turn around. The night is at its absolute darkest just moments before the first rays of morning sun illuminate the sky.

In the morning service, we say: "Blessed are You, God, Who forms light and creates darkness..." It is understandable that we thank God for light. But why for darkness?

Because Judaism says that darkness is not negative. Rather it is a necessary step in the process toward light. Only because of our limited perception, do we perceive the darkness as an end unto itself.

Place a seed into the ground – a dark, cold, dirty place where the seed begins to decay. To the onlooker, it looks like death. Then, at the very moment the seed has completely broken down, something miraculous happens. It begins to sprout.

In thinking about our own life, career, and cherished relationships, haven't we experienced our most momentous growth when times have been tough – more so than when they've been smooth?

From the darkness comes light.

## Redemption And Sanity

Imagine someone with a serious disease. Taking the right medication will detoxify the body and push the impurities to the surface of the skin. At that moment the patient looks deathly ill, all covered in sores. In truth, those sores are a positive sign of deeper healing.

So too the world. The Talmud says that as the Messianic era approaches, the world will experience greater and greater turmoil: economic, social and political turmoil. The culmination will be a world war of immense proportion led by King Gog from the land of Magog.

The Moshiach will then come and herald the redemption. He will inspire all peoples to know God. He will rebuild the Temple, gather the remaining Jewish exiles to Israel, and re-establish the Sanhedrin. (Maimonides – Laws of Kings ch. 11-12)

If the news is filled with tales of confusion and strife, don't despair. Just as the words "I am Joseph" put all previous difficulties into perspective, so too in the end of time all will be clear for us.

And yet, we are not consigned to any period of pain. If we internalize the truth of God's world and live with that reality, the final resolution will come more quickly and painlessly. At the very least, living with this perspective is sure to preserve our sanity – for only those who maintain belief until the very end will be counted among the survivors. May it be speedily in our days.



## Positive Criticism and What It Means to Be a Jew

This *parashah* is perhaps the most emotional *parashah* in the Torah. After 22 years of separation, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and declares, "I am Joseph - is my father still alive?"[1] These words were the most devastating admonishment that Joseph could have given to his brothers. Instead of berating them for having sold him into bondage, he simply said, "I am Joseph," implying, "My dreams, which you attributed to delusions of grandeur, were fulfilled; God did make me king, and He did send you to bow down before me." But note that nowhere does Joseph actually utter those words.

The declaration, "I am Joseph," was sufficient. He allows his brothers to infer the rest and his question, "Is my father [rather than *our* father] still alive?" cuts to the core of the issue, for it suggests that they had not conducted themselves as sons should, else they could not have sold their brother and led their elderly father to believe him dead. But again, Joseph does not introduce himself with these words. Rather, with his terse "Is my father still alive?" he invites his brothers to judge themselves.

From this we learn that admonishment is most effective when used as a mirror and that it can never be accomplished through painful jokes, shouting, cynical remarks, or name-calling. Such tactics can only result in secondary problems that lead to further resentment and alienation.

When Joseph embraces his brother Benjamin, he falls on his neck and weeps profusely, and Benjamin, in turn, does the same.[2] The Gemara explains that Joseph was crying over the Holy Temples that would be destroyed in the land allotted to Benjamin, and Benjamin was crying over the Tabernacle that would be destroyed in the portion allotted to Joseph. The question remains, however, why they chose this particular moment to weep over the Temples and the Tabernacle. The message that the Torah imparts is that, tragically, they foresaw that the very same acrimony that led to the splintering of the House of Jacob would continue to divide our people and lead to the destruction of the Temples. Joseph and Benjamin cried for each other's pain, teaching us that the only remedy to this plague of hatred is for us to learn to empathize with one another, to feel each other's pain, and reach out with *chesed* - exemplifying kindness and love.

### **NEVER GIVE UP**

In this *parashah* we discover some of the ways through which the name "Jew" defines us as a people. When the sons of Jacob are confronted by the irrational accusations of the viceroy of Egypt (Joseph), and realize that the life of their younger brother Benjamin is at risk, then Judah (whose name connotes "Jew," for a Jew is called a *Yehudi*) rises like a lion and does battle for his

brother. As desperate and as hopeless as the situation appears to be, Judah - a man of *complete* faith - does not *give up*. Similarly, we, his descendants, have never given up.

The obstacles that Judah confronts are many. The Egyptian viceroy (Joseph) pretends that he doesn't speak or understand Hebrew. An interpreter acts as an intermediary, and the evidence weighs heavily against Benjamin. Nevertheless, speaking Hebrew from his heart, Judah cites Jewish sensitivity. One may ask what Judah could possibly have hoped to accomplish by speaking in Hebrew and referring to Jewish values to this supposed Egyptian, Joseph.

A wonderful story about the great Sage, the Chofetz Chaim, explains it all. The Polish government had passed an edict that would have the effect of prohibiting independent Jewish education, thus jeopardizing the continuation of Torah life. The Chofetz Chaim requested a meeting with the Polish president. Even as Judah spoke in Hebrew, the Chofetz Chaim spoke in Yiddish and a Jewish senator stood by to translate. Although the president did not understand Yiddish, the Chofetz Chaim's heartrending plea touched him so deeply that tears filled his eyes. When the interpreter began to translate, the president quickly interrupted him and said, "Although I do not speak Yiddish, I understand the words of this holy man. He spoke from the heart, and one heart understands another heart. The edict is rescinded."

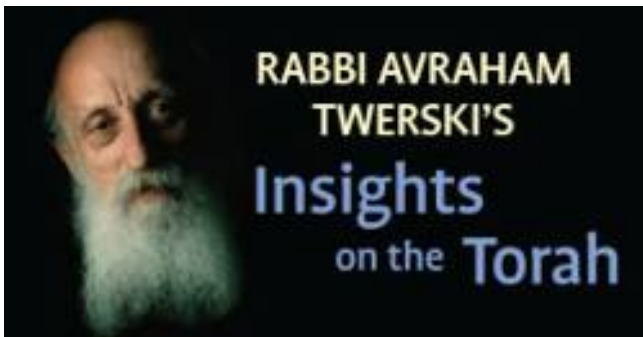
This is the legacy of Judah: If we speak in the name of God, if we uphold our Torah, and are prepared to put our lives on the line for the sake



of our brethren, there will be no barrier that we cannot overcome.

We, the Jewish people, have survived the centuries with the Torah as our guide. Our *emunah* (faith) has sustained us. We have never lost hope. So, if we feel overwhelmed by life's struggles, we must remember that we are Jews - descended from the family of Judah. Let us connect with our Torah, with our faith, and God will surely come to our aid. Let us remember that the name Judah also means "to give thanks and praise to God." [3] Ultimately, that is probably the most compelling definition of us as a Jewish people: In times of joy as well as in times of adversity, we give thanks to our Creator; we never give up, knowing that He will always protect us.

1. Genesis 45:3.
2. Ibid. 45:14.
3. Ibid. 29:35.



## Sanctified Speech

*“Behold! Your eyes see as do the eyes of my brother Benjamin that it is my mouth that is speaking to you”  
(45:12)*

Rashi comments that the words, “my mouth is speaking to you” mean “in *lashon hakodesh* (the holy tongue.)” Purportedly, this means that Joseph offered as proof of his identity that he knew Hebrew.

But in what way was this a proof? Until now, they communicated through an interpreter, whom they assumed to be an Egyptian who obviously knew Hebrew.

Rashi's words may have an additional meaning. All matter is divided into four categories: *domem* (inanimate), *tzomeach* (vegetative), *chai* (living) and *medaber* (speaking). The last is the category of man, the only being that can speak.

But is this really so? Is man the only creature that can communicate by sound? We know that many forms of life communicate by sound. Are the sounds they make not a form of speaking? Granted, human speech is much more sophisticated, but that makes it only quantitatively distinct from animal verbalizations, but it is not a qualitative distinction. More types of sounds and a greater vocabulary are not enough to give man the distinction of being "a speaker".

The uniqueness of man is not just that he has a more sophisticated form of speech, but that he can elevate his speech to being holy. By using his speech properly, by not speaking foolishly, by avoiding defamatory speech and carrying tales, man can sanctify his speech. This is something that animals cannot do, and it is this ability to sanctify speech that merits the designation "speaker".

Although the brothers' action cannot be justified, Joseph was not totally innocent. The Torah says that “he would bring evil reports about them to his father” (Genesis 37:2) The Midrash states that all the evil reports were groundless, and Joseph was, therefore, guilty of *lashon hara*. During his enslavement and imprisonment, Joseph did *teshuvah* to purify himself of *lashon hara*, derogatory speech.

However, Jewish law states that an offense against another person is not forgiven until one makes proper amends and asks for forgiveness from that person. In revealing himself to his brothers, Joseph wished to tell them that he had repented for the derogatory speech he had spoken about them. “I have corrected that defective trait. I have sanctified my speech. I am now truly a *medaber*, a speaker,” Rashi's comment means more than that I speak Hebrew. Being polylinguistic does not yet warrant the designation of *medaber*. One is a “speaker” only if one's speech is *kodesh*, only if one sanctifies his speech.

We should indeed take pride in having the gift of speech, but unless we sanctify our speech, we are not yet unique. Avoiding the abuse of this precious gift is what makes us unique as humans.

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