

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Joseph Applebaum.
"May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

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PARSHAS MIKEITZ

Trying Too Hard

And it came to pass at the end of two full years, that Pharaoh dreamed; and, behold, he stood by the river (41:1).

This week's *parsha* begins in a rather unusual manner; while the Torah is about to recount a detailed description of Pharaoh's dreams, the first verse is really a continuation of the previous story. The two years, that set the backdrop for what is about to take place, are referring to the additional years that Yosef languished in jail after asking the wine steward to hasten his release.

At the end of last week's *parsha*, Rashi explains; "Since Yosef relied on the wine steward to remember him (instead of relying solely on Hashem) he was forced to remain imprisoned for two additional years" (40:23). In other words, Yosef is punished for pleading with the wine steward to help him get released.

Many of the commentators wonder as to what exactly was Yosef's mistake. After all, while we all believe and trust that Hashem ultimately provides our *parnassa* (livelihood), we know that we must actually go to work in order to receive what Hashem provides for us. This process is known as making *hishtadlus* – exerting an effort. In other words, we live in a physical world with its unique built-in natural laws; we therefore must make the effort within the construct of the reality that we live in, and then Hashem directs to us what He desires we receive.

In light of this, the commentators ask; what did Yosef do wrong? Yosef was merely "doing his *hishtadlus*" to improve his situation! This is a fundamental philosophical understanding of how the world operates; Yosef getting punished for

this action seems difficult to understand.

The Targum Yonasan Ben Uziel and Targum Yerushalmi (40:23) make a very opaque comment: "Because Yosef abandoned the *chessed* of the One above and relied on the *chessed* of the wine steward, Yosef remained incarcerated until it was the proper time for his release as determined by Hashem." What *chessed* are these Targumim referring to?

A careful reading of the *pesukim* reveals what the Targumim saw in the story: When Yosef first gets incarcerated the Torah says (39:20), "and he was there in the prison. But Hashem was with Joseph, and showed him *chessed*, and gave him favor in the eyes of the keeper of the prison." This "*chessed*" that Hashem shows to Yosef leads to remarkable circumstances whereby Yosef is actually put in charge of the prison and prisoners. The Torah tells us that everything that happened in the prison was under his supervision and he answered to no one (39:22-23). In fact, as the *posuk* attests – Hashem was actually with him in prison.

Yet, when he successfully interprets the dreams of the baker and wine steward and goes on to correctly predict the events that would come to pass, Yosef begs the wine steward to "think of me when it shall be well with you, and I beg you to do for me a *chessed*..." (40:14).

We can now understand what the Targumim are referring to and also learn an astonishing life lesson regarding the limitations of making *hishtadlus*. Yosef



was granted an incredible gift by Hashem. How does a lowly slave, from a foreign country, convicted of a crime against one of the high-born families of Egypt, come to such a position in jail? Obviously, and as the Torah clearly attests, Hashem was with Yosef and gifted him a miraculous situation.

Yosef's mistake, it seems, was not recognizing that the very fact that Hashem had granted him such success under the most dire of circumstances, meant that Hashem was telling him: "This is where I want you to be." Instead, Yosef makes an effort to engage the wine steward, and asks for the wine steward's *chessed*. Yosef, being the great man that he was, should have recognized that exchanging the *chessed* of Hashem for the *chessed* of the wine steward was a terrible mistake.

Often, we do not internalize the incredible gifts that the Almighty has bestowed upon us. We constantly look to try and change our circumstances. While we must make every effort to improve ourselves and grow in many areas of our lives, we must be cognizant and appreciative of what we have already. Trying to change your life when Hashem has clearly blessed your current life trajectory means that you don't really appreciate what Hashem has granted you. We must make *hishtadlus* to be worthy of Hashem's blessings; not to reject those blessings that He already bestowed upon us.

Who Can You Trust?

And Yehuda said to his father, "Send the boy with me [...] I will guarantee his safety; from my hand you can request him; if I do not bring him back to you, and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever" (43:8-9).

When the brothers returned from Egypt with the food they acquired, they informed their father Yaakov that before they would be allowed to return down to Egypt they would have to be accompanied by their youngest brother, Binyamin. In fact, Yosef was holding Shimon hostage until they returned. Yaakov naturally balked at this, seeing as he was losing sons at a horrifying rate.

Reuven makes an effort to persuade his father with a rather strange statement: "I will bring him (Binyamin) back safely to you or you can put my two sons to death" (42:37). The Midrash (*Bereishis Rabbah* 90:9) takes Reuven to task: Yaakov responded, "You deranged first born! Are not your children my children as well?" Yaakov refuses to permit Binyamin to go.

Yet a few short *pesukim* later Yehuda says to his father, "Send the boy with me [...] I will guarantee his safety; from my hand you can request him; if I do not bring him back to you, and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever." Rashi explains that Yehuda put up his share, in both this world and in the world to come, as collateral for the safety of Binyomin. In other words, Yehuda would be lost for all eternity if he doesn't bring Binyomin back.

Strangely, Yaakov finds this acceptable and agrees to send Binyomin down with Yehuda. In light of the aforementioned *midrash*, why is Yaakov okay with Yehuda's proposed consequences for failure to return Binyomin? In essence, he would be losing a son for all eternity! On the face of it, both Reuven and Yehuda are proposing terrible consequences for

their failure to perform. Why does Yaakov accept Yehuda's proposal?

This story teaches us a remarkable lesson in human behavior. Often, we try to guarantee good behavior by creating deterrents to bad behavior. This almost never works because, come what may, we always rationalize why the punishments won't occur, or otherwise won't apply to our situation. The classic example: harsh punishment doesn't successfully deter crime.

Yehuda makes a very different argument than Reuven: "I will guarantee his safety." He personally guarantees performance. In other words, he is undertaking as a personal commitment that he will fulfill his word. Of course, giving dire consequences also underscores the level of commitment, but the real guarantee of performance isn't fear of the punishment for nonperformance, it's the acceptance of a personal obligation. This is what convinces Yaakov.

Fear of painful consequences rarely works to help one achieve goals. We have to begin by committing to a certain path of performance and only then can we use consequences to keep us on the proper path.

Did You Know...

In this week's *parsha*, Yosef becomes viceroy of Egypt, and his brothers come to him to acquire food for their families. While in Egypt, Yosef accuses them of being spies and throws Shimon in jail; but why Shimon?

The Medrash (*Bereishis Rabbah* 91:6) explains that Yosef chose Shimon because he was the only one who threw him into the pit. Yosef also wanted to split up Shimon and Levi, who could be dangerous together and would have plotted to kill him. This explains how it wasn't an act of revenge (which would be an *aveirah*). Alternatively, Josephus (*Antiquities* 2:3:2) says that it was Reuven who gently lowered Yosef into the pit. The Ibn Ezra provides another alternative, that it simply would've been Reuven, who was oldest, but since Reuven saved Yosef he chose the next eldest.

Interestingly, the Medrash mentions that the following occurred when Shimon was ordered to jail:

1. When Shimon realized his brothers weren't going to protest he accused them of doing the same thing to him that they did to Yosef. The brothers explained that they couldn't let their families die of hunger. Shimon replied, "Do whatever you want, but let's see who is able to put me in prison!"
2. Yosef sent seventy mighty warriors to arrest him, but Shimon screamed, causing them to collapse and their teeth to shatter.
3. Yosef had to tell Menashe to assist in the arrest; he stood up, punched Shimon once, and threw him in jail.
4. Another Medrash (*Medrash Tanchuma Vayigash* 4) adds that when Shimon was punched he yelled to his brothers that he was definitely punched by someone from their family.



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