

This week's parsha contains one of the strangest stories of Chumash – the story of Yosef and his brothers. There are many different angles from which one can understand this story. One angle is to understand the story from the point of view of Yosef. Another could be from the point of view of the brothers. And yet another can be from the point of view of how Hashem's providence brought about the intended result through all the various personalities in the story.

At the Bris Bein Habesorim, Hashem told Avrohom that his descendants will inevitably wind up as foreigners in exile – and become oppressed and persecuted slaves. Afterwards, they would leave with great wealth. This was the prerequisite for Klal Yisroel to earn Eretz Yisroel as their own land. Klal Yisroel had to undergo slavery and persecution in Egypt in order to be worthy of entering Eretz Yisroel and Hashem's providence arranged it to happen in a certain way – through Yosef first going down to Egypt ahead of his family.

Hashem's providence works in a very interesting way. On the one hand, every individual has free-will. But Hashem uses a person's free-will in responding to various circumstances in order to orchestrate a particular outcome.

Hashem sends Yosef dreams and Yosef feels compelled to tell the dreams to his family. Why? According to Rabbeinu Bachye, Yosef recognized that these dreams were nevu'ah – prophetic – and it is forbidden for a *novi* to suppress his prophecy. These weren't ordinary dreams. Yosef felt he was a *novi* and these dreams were instructions from Hashem which had to be fulfilled.

His brothers, however, thought these were ordinary dreams which merely expressed Yosef's personal ambition to dominate them. They judged Yosef as attempting to usurp the authority of Yehudoh and condemned him for it. Yaakov waited to see what would happen. Rashi explains that Yaakov was confident that Yosef's dreams were prophetic and he was anticipating when they would eventually come true in the end.

Yosef's brothers were jealous of him and hated him. They made no secret about this to Yosef. They went to Shechem to herd the animals. Yaakov tells Yosef to go up to his brothers to check up on them. On the one hand, Yosef knew that this task was dangerous. He knew that his brothers hated him. On the other hand, Yosef could not disobey a direct request of his father. He was duty-bound to fulfill it as *kibbud av*. So the *posuk* says he is dispatched from the "valley of Chevron". He can't find them. He wanders here and there and gets lost. He comes upon a 'man' who tells him they left Shechem and went to Dosan. Chazal noticed that the Torah mentions this 'man' which Yosef bumps into repeatedly and they explain that this is no ordinary man. It is a *maloch* – or a series of *malochim* – sent by Hashem to keep Yosef on course.

Yosef had every reason to give up – after getting lost again and again – and turn around to go back home to safety. But Hashem used Yosef's strong sense of *kibbud av* to make sure he kept looking for his brothers until he found them. The Ramban makes the following important statement. Hashem's *gezeirah* will always be fulfilled in the end, despite Yosef's and his brother's free-will.

Yosef's deep loyalty to his father led him to suffer at the hands of his brothers, but in the end, this same loyalty to Yaakov gave him the strength to pass the ultimate test – resist the seduction of Potifar's wife. He merited to become the ruler over Egypt as a result. On the

flip-side, the brothers also had free-will. Their jealousy drove them to sell Yosef and they were punished for exercising their free-will in this negative way – even though this is what Hashem wanted to happen to Yosef. Had the brothers resisted the pull of their jealousy and not sold Yosef to Egypt, Hashem would have found another way to get Yosef there. But Hashem uses people's free-willed decisions to bring about the results He wants.

The concept of specific *hashgochah* *protis* – divine providence in directing our lives – is one of the most fundamental ideas of the Torah. There are many aspects to it. Hashem directs people, nations, entire regions, local and global natural events, etc. He rewards and punishes for the smallest, insignificant action. The Rambam in *Moreh Nevuchim* writes that everything and anything that happens to us is the result of Hashem's infinite calculation of reward and punishment. Not only the big things in life but even the smallest inconveniences and frustrations are small punishments, and the little perks and satisfactions we get are rewards. But this is divine providence for the individual on a daily basis. Then there is providence on a historic scale – your overall life's direction. You can achieve great things in your life if you overcome tests and prove yourself worthy.

Yosef had dreams of becoming the ruler over Klal Yisroel. Hashem would only bring the fulfillment of those dreams if Yosef passed the tests he had as a slave in Egypt and shows he is worthy. If he fails, the dreams won't be fulfilled and Hashem will bring Klal Yisroel down to Egypt a different way.

Imagine Yosef's state of mind: after being his father's favorite son, hoping to be a future leader of Klal Yisroel, he is sold off as a lowly slave by his own brothers and shipped to a foreign land. Can you imagine someone going through this today? He would need a whole team of 10 therapists just to be able to get out of bed! But Yosef was not broken – he has *shem shomayim* on his lips the entire time and he is reviewing the Torah he learned with his father constantly. He is blessed with success, but he takes no credit for them. It is a blessing from Hashem. Yosef is so sincere in his attributing everything to Hashem, even his master Potifar starts to realize something unusual is going on with this slave.

But then this leads to Potifar leaving everything in his house under Yosef's command, and he starts to get the attention of Potifar's wife. This is a serious test which gets more and more difficult day-by-day. She is promising Yosef everything he could want – not just pleasure of the moment, but freedom from slavery and eventually nobility – to get out of his lowly station that he was unfairly thrown into. Yosef is sorely tempted to accept the offer. His resolve is about to crack.

Imagine if Yosef had given in to temptation, and Potifar's wife would have kept all her promises and made Yosef an Egyptian nobleman. Yosef would have probably congratulated himself for doing the smart thing and succeeding in life, and be thankful that he wasn't a pious fool that passed up an opportunity like that! Little would this alternate version of Yosef realize, that by being that 'pious fool' and standing up to temptation, he would have become far, far greater than he was now. He would have become the ruler of all Egypt!

Yosef understood that Hashem is running the world and he will not lose out by having *yiras shomayim*. Still, how did Yosef get such strength to overcome the extreme temptation? After all, he is still human!

Rashi explains that Yosef realized that by giving in now, he is giving

up the olom haboh he could have earned – to be one of the shevotim – and that loss is forever and ever. Chazal also say that when Potifar's wife grasped Yosef's cloak, at that very moment, Yosef saw two people: Potifar's wife and the image of his father Yaakov. He now has to decide who does he belong to? Where is his future going to be? With his master's wife or with his father? If the image of his father had not been manifested so strongly in front of him, he wouldn't have survived the test. The very thing which got Yosef into trouble in the first place – his devotion to his father's command to find his brothers – is the same thing which saved him from catastrophe. He saw who he belonged to – his father in olom haboh and not Potifar's wife in olam hazeh.

This is a basic choice people make – a choice between olom hazeh and olom haboh. The mishnah in Pirkei Ovos says olom hazeh is like a corridor you go through before you enter a gigantic banquet hall. Prepare yourself in the corridor – in this world – to be able to enter the banquet hall – olom haboh. This mishnah should help us realize that we are here in this world for a reason. All of the decisions you make: whether to get up to make the minyan or to stay in bed, how you will make a living, where you will live, or how you will raise your children, all of them are choices that impact your olom haboh. You need to make the choices that will maximize your olom haboh instead of minimizing it.

Yosef is standing at a tremendous crossroads in his life. It will determine his entire future! There is this woman who is throwing herself and everything she has at him – all the pleasures and status and luxuries every young man would run after. But he refuses it all and she pulls his cloak out of desperation. Yosef decides to just break free – to leave his cloak in her hands and run. He doesn't even trust himself to go back for ten seconds to take the incriminating evidence out of her hands. Not for ten seconds! He has to get far away fast because he knew the pull was so strong. All this was part of the test. He didn't just walk out – he ran out.

Because of this refusal, Yosef winds up in jail. Divine providence starts to make things happen. He finds favor in the eyes of the jail keeper and Yosef is put in charge of running the jail and is again successful in everything he does. But again, Yosef takes no credit for any success. He constantly attributes all his abilities to Hashem. This is how Yosef becomes worthy of the next step of Hashem's providence – that the royal wine steward and royal baker make mistakes and are sent to the same jail and have dreams. Without standing up to tests, you won't deserve the promises to be fulfilled.

Yosef walked in one day and noticed two people in the jail who look depressed. He asked them what the problem is. It is interesting that Yosef takes an interest in the emotional state of these two strangers. But, he is a descendant of Avrohom Ovinu. The middoh of chessed naturally extends to everyone who can use your help. If Yosef hadn't showed any care or concern for these two people, providence would not have been in place to arrange for Yosef's eventual release from jail. You have to deserve it at every step in the process. There are no guarantees.

First, Yosef's yiras shomayim is sorely tested in the most extreme way by Potifar's wife. Then Yosef's middos are tested in the most subtle way by these strangers. But both of them have to be passed in order to advance to the last level and become the ruler of Egypt.

Yosef takes no credit for interpreting their dreams. All of his talents and abilities come from Hashem. Yosef sees Hashem's providence in everything that is going on. But then, Yosef slips a little bit and asks a favor from the wine steward – to remember him after he leaves, and mention him to Pharaoh to help get him out of jail too. Yosef is punished for this and he is forgotten.

One could ask, why was Yosef punished for doing a little hishtadlus? Why wasn't this little hishtadlus appropriate? The answer is that when you see Hashem's providence consistently in your life, directing you every step of the way, and you don't take credit for anything, you don't suddenly make your own hishtadlus. It is out of place. It is like going through kriyas yam suf and worrying about getting a life preserver ready just in case the water comes down on you. In the middle of a clear miraculous intervention, hishtadlus isn't appropriate.

Similarly when Yosef appeared before Pharaoh in the next parsha, he never took any credit for his ability to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. It is all Hashem's insight coming down through him to inform Pharaoh of the future of his country. As a result of this interpretation, Yosef becomes the ruler of Egypt.

When Yosef finally revealed himself to his brothers, he sent word to his father that he is alive and had become the ruler of Egypt. At first Yaakov was not moved. Why? Because all he knew about the ruler of Egypt was that he was a cruel and manipulative tyrant terrorizing his family! If this evil ruler turned out to be his own son Yosef, it would be tragic. This is not the son that Yaakov was preparing all those years to raise as one of the shivtei Koh. Yosef was effectively dead to him if this is how he turned out. So what if his son became the ruler of Egypt? He is not the father of Klal Yisroel anymore. His entire life's mission has failed!

Yosef understood that this would be Yaakov's reaction. So he sent his father agolos. He is alluding Yaakov that he is still learning the sugyos of egloh arufoh that they learned together when he was in Canaan all those years ago. When Yaakov heard this, he becomes revived! His son is still Yosef hatzaddik – one of the shivtei Koh! He runs out to greet Yosef with open arms.

Yosef gives us an incredible lesson in chinuch – how to raise children in golus. Why? Yosef was in Egypt, living as royalty, but brings up two sons there who are able to become part of the shivtei Koh! Yaakov tells Yosef that Menashe and Ephraim are like Reuven and Shimon! How did he do this? When you read the list of people coming from Eretz Canaan to Egypt in Parshas Vayigash, you notice that Yosef and his two sons are counted among the seventy members of Yaakov's household. How could this be if they are already in Egypt! The answer is that you are where your mind is – and Yosef and his sons were mentally in Canaan with his father and his brothers.

Yosef developed three key attributes which allowed him to weather all his nisyonos.

1) Shem shomayim was always on his lips. He saw Hashem's providence in every detail of his life – from the high points to the low points. He knew Hashem was watching him and guiding him, and he accepted everything that happened to him as the hand of Hashem. He never took credit for his talents and fabulous success. It wasn't an intellectual awareness. He kept it in front of him at all times and spoke about his beliefs openly.

2) He kept the image of Yaakov Ovinu in front of him. He belonged to Yaakov and couldn't let him down or betray him.

3) He kept learning all the sugyos and the mesorah that Yaakov taught him.

Yosef finally became the ruler over the shevotim and over all of Egypt and his dreams were fulfilled. But Yosef had to earn them. We only become worthy of getting all the opportunities we are given by weathering all the tests we are given. Nothing is guaranteed unless you deserve it.