

PARSHAS VAYIGASH

תשפ"ד

Yosef Hatzaddik is one of the most unusual figures in Chumash. Yosef has his dreams. He saw two very unusual things. The shevotim are represented by sheaves of grain, and they are bowing down to him. But they are shepherds – not farmers! Why would Yosef tell these dreams to his brothers? To make them angry and jealous? Yosef thought these dreams were prophetic, and he was obligated not to suppress this nevuah and tell his brothers how Hashem wanted the shevotim to be guided.

When Yosef goes down to meet his brothers in Shechem, he knows his brothers hate him and he is putting himself in danger. He can't find them in Shechem and he gets lost, and this would be a valid excuse to give up on the search and go back home to safety. But Yosef keeps going and Hashem keeps sending him malochim to steer him in the right direction to find the shevotim.

The Ramban says, Hashem's decrees will ultimately be fulfilled and all the efforts people make to thwart them are futile. Hashem is manipulating all these people involved in the story in order to bring Yosef down to Egypt to prepare the way for golus Mitzrayim in the most ideal way possible. Hashem knows that Yosef has an incredible sense of kibbud av. Hashem knows Yosef will be determined to carry out Yaakov's mission. In the end, this is what saved Yosef.

Hashem then takes the hatred Yosef's brothers have for him and puts it together with Yosef's kibbud av to make sure Yosef finds his brothers and is sold as a slave in Egypt.

In order for Yosef's dreams to come true, he has to bring himself up to the level where he is worthy of ruling over the shevotim. Yosef goes through all the nisyonos and proves himself worthy. The Chumash counts the 70 members of Yaakov's household. Among those who are coming down from Canaan to Egypt are Yosef and his two sons. This is incredible because Menashe and Efraim never saw Canaan – they never lived there! But they are still counted as coming down along with the rest of Yaakov's family because that is how Yosef raised them. He raised them with the mindset that they are a part of Yaakov Ovinu's household living in Canaan. This teaches us a valuable lesson – you are where your mind is. When Yaakov and his household moved from Canaan to Egypt, Yosef and his sons are also moving down with them.

Yosef is first a slave, then a prisoner in jail, and then the ruler of the most powerful and richest country in the entire world. Throughout all these phases in life, he didn't change. He didn't change his mental focus of being a son of Yaakov. So much so, that this identity was passed on to his children! How did Yosef achieve this? How did he overcome all those nisyonos and maintain such a strong, separate identity from his immediate environment for 22 long years?

Yosef was identified as an Ivri by his Egyptian masters. The Ivrim were people who came under the influence of Avrohom Ovinu and had customs which were despised by the Egyptians. The Egyptians refused to eat at the same table with them. Yosef realized this and capitalized on it. He proudly announced to everyone he met that he is an Ivri and he made himself separate from Egyptian society as a result. How did he maintain the sense of not belonging and being the subject of disgust for all that time?

Yosef had three things which helped him. One factor was constantly having Shem Shomayim on his lips. It is one thing for people to say it now and then, and believe it theoretically, and it is another thing to live with it in your day-to-day reality under every kind of circumstance.

Yosef acknowledged openly that everything that happens to him and everything he achieves is from Hashem – even though he knows that this will lead him to more social isolation. Yosef never takes credit for any of his accomplishments and success. He insists that it is only from Hashem – from running Potifar's household, to running the jail, to interpreting the dreams of the prisoners to interpreting the dream of Pharaoh himself. He is finally given the chance to free himself and from prison and earn the favor of the most powerful person in the world – he only has to make a good impression on Pharaoh by showing off his talents. But he refuses. He claims he has no talents of his own at all! It all comes from Hashem. No shame, no regret. He knows who he is and he is proud.

Every Jew needs to know who he is. Yonah teaches us a valuable lesson in Jewish identity. The ship is about to capsize and the sailors realize it is all happening because of Yonah. So they ask him: who is he and what is his profession? Most people, most Jews even, would respond by saying where they came from, what country they are citizens of, or what they do for a living. But Yonah says he is an Ivri and he fears Hashem, who made the sea and the land. That is the entirety of who he is – not where he lives and not how he makes money. Some Jews are embarrassed to identify publicly as Jews while they are among non-Jews. They wear baseball caps instead of a yarmulka. Not Yosef and not Yonah. They know who they are and they let everyone around them know exactly who they are and what their metzius is.

Now we come to the second strategy Yosef uses to maintain his identity.

When the brothers come back to Yaakov the first time, they describe Yosef as this monster who kidnaps Shimon and is extorting them by withholding food to force them to bring their youngest brother to him. This is horribly painful for Yaakov to hear. Yaakov cannot have a very high opinion of this cruel dictator. So what must Yaakov think when he is told that this ruler of Egypt was really Yosef all along? He probably thought: what good is it to me that Yosef is still alive if he has become this horrible, evil person? He refuses to accept it. But then the posuk says Yaakov sees the agolos and then his spirit is revived. Yosef sends agolos to show Yaakov that he is still the same son that left him 22 years ago. He is still learning the same Torah that he learned with Yaakov. This is what kept him Yosef Hatzaddik. He stayed connected to Torah learning the entire time.

There is one extra thing which keeps Yosef from failing in his nisyonos. It helped him survive his greatest nisayon – the wife of Potifar. She is promising Yosef everything he could want. He will be free, he will become an Egyptian nobleman with wealth and prestige, etc. Now imagine for a moment that Yosef gives in to Potifar's wife and he rises in Egyptian society and becomes a nobleman. Chances are Yosef would look back 20 years later and congratulate himself for making such a smart decision, and ridicule the option of refusing the offer and going to jail. He would never suspect in a million years that by refusing the offer, he would become even more rich and powerful, beyond his wildest dreams.

On the day Yosef came in for work, no one was there besides her. She throws herself at him and Chazal describe how difficult it was to resist. Just imagine how traumatized and isolated this young boy, rejected by his family must be, and how vulnerable he is at that moment. Chazal tell us that he can only find the strength to refuse her because the image of his father Yaakov pops up in his mind. He runs out and leaves

his cloak in her hands! He doesn't even take the time to grab that cloak back and take away the incriminating evidence. Why? Yosef doesn't trust himself to remain with her for even one second. The image of his father is so strong that it overcomes all the temptations of olam hazeh.

This is what keeps us strong – living with an image of someone who you look up to and holds you to a higher standard at all times. My grandfather's father was a Rav in Romania and sat and learned day and night in poverty. My grandfather came to America to find work to make money to support his family back in Romania when he was 18 years old. But was fired from job after job because he refused to work on Shabbos. Before he left for America, my grandfather's father made him promise to keep up two things – that he always daven with a minyan, and that he attend a shiur once a week. This powerful image of his father who he had to measure up to, was in my grandfather's mind his entire life. I saw this myself. It never left him and it kept him strong till the end of his life. He never missed tefillah b'tzibbur until he was 82 years old and his entire Yiddishkeit was preserved because of it.

This image of Yaakov was so strong and deep, that Yosef managed to pass it on to his children.

The story of Yosef Hatzaddik is a lesson of how to survive nisyonos and how to remain so strong in golus that your children are able to maintain that level. He kept Hashem on his lips, he constantly reviewed the Torah he learned, and he had the image of his father in front of

him always.

One thing that people typically overlook, is that Yosef had incredible emunoh. When Yaakov dies, the brothers are scared that Yosef will now take revenge for how they treated him all those years ago. Yosef tells them they have nothing to worry about. Yosef understands fully well how this world is run. Hashem orchestrated this entire chain of events in order to make me the ruler of Egypt and take care of Yaakov's entire family in golus. He used your bad middos to make all this happen. There was no point to blaming and taking revenge. It is an incredible level of emunoh and bitochon.

Earlier, we see Yosef is in charge of the prisoners and he notices that the sar hamashkim and sar ha'ofim are sad and depressed. He stops and asks them what the problem is. It is a small nisayon to see if Yosef cares about his fellow human beings. This is part of the reason why Hashem chose Avrohom Ovinu. Hashem knows Avrohom will teach his family the derech Hashem – middos tovos. In addition to Yosef's unbelievable yiras shomayim, hasmodo and emunoh, he had a great measure of middos tovos which was critical for getting him where he had to go. Without it, he would have failed. Where did he get it from? The Ovos.

The story of Yosef is powerful – it teaches us how to survive as Jews under all circumstances and under all conditions. We need to bring these lessons deep into our hearts.