



Hanukkah - Pittsburgh 5779 December 8, 2018 - 30th of Kislev, 5779

This issue of the FJMC Unraveller, a weekly commentary explaining the aspects of Jewish history, ideas and thought, is being sent to you by the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs. We hope you enjoy it and find it intellectually challenging.

As we marked this past weekend the transition into Hanukkah from Shloshim (the conclusion to one's first month of mourning) for the eleven martyrs of the massacre at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, I am again dedicating this Unraveller commentary (and my revisiting further below of an earlier one for the Jewish Theological Seminary) so that the FJMC international community might honor their memories through Torah study.

Indeed, I have reflected often in recent weeks upon what it means for us as Jews to wish upon the deceased that "their memory be for a blessing." One crucial way that we make this adage into a reality is by telling the stories of their lives in such a way that we derive wisdom and guidance for how we might lead our own lives in the aftermath of their ascent from this world into what our Sages call the World-to-Come. However much the hereafter remains obscured from our human perception, we face that unknown next plane of reality by illuminating the lives that our loved ones led and drawing inspiration from their lived examples.

The late Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel z"l wrote in the preface to his novel, *The Gates of the Forest*, that "God created man because He loves stories." Some have said that Jews took that idea and made it into a religious obligation to pay forward that favor, placing God at the center of how we narrate and elaborate upon the journeys our people have taken. Ever since Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden, Noah and his family entered the Ark, and Abraham and Sarah left Haran – each of those episodes and so many others describe God's explicit role in the Torah of how our ancestors moved from their birthplaces towards an unknown future. In fact, those initial origin stories give way to increasing sense of uncertainty with each generation that passes.

A prime counter-example to those early stories in Genesis is Joseph's narrative, which begins in this past week's Torah portion and every year coincides liturgically with Hanukkah. Unlike the life experiences of his father, grandfather and great-grandfather, not once does God or an angel explicitly appear to Joseph or speak to him in the dozen chapters of Genesis that depict his tale of descent from the Promised Land into slavery and then imprisonment in Egypt before his eventual rise to the heights of power in Pharaoh's royal court. Our protagonist, nonetheless, insists that his travails and later triumphs demonstrated not the arbitrary ups and downs of our human condition but rather the intended albeit circuitous outcomes of God's divine providence. In Genesis 45:5-6, Joseph tells his brothers that "God sent me before you...to save your lives

by a great deliverance. Therefore it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me...a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt.”

Joseph's certainty of God's hidden direction might seem surprising – after all, he does not explain in the verses above how he discerned “God's hand” in his life. Neither do we gain greater clarity from the narrator's phrase, repeated four times and book-ending Genesis 39, that “God was with Joseph” – how specifically and concretely was this so? One compelling answer comes from Rashi, the major medieval French commentator, who cites our Ancient Sages' insight into a seemingly-incidental encounter.

In Genesis 37:15-17, Joseph comes upon “a man” who is “wandering in the fields” who asks our protagonist, “What are you looking for?” While Joseph answers regarding the literal whereabouts of his brothers, the early Rabbis hear the deeper figurative question posed here to Joseph and posit that this is one of several instances in which an unnamed “man” in the Torah actually represents an angel (in this case, the Angel Gabriel) hiding in plain sight. This becomes the pivotal moment in Joseph's young life, for the guidance he receives in finding his brothers leads him into their betrayal of him, first throwing him into a pit and then selling him into slavery.

In Joseph's hindsight at some point later, however, our Ancient Sages imagine Joseph reflecting upon his shortcomings and, instead of regretting that chance encounter, seeing that God had intended for Joseph to find his brothers in order to set him on the journey that unfolds. This tradition of rabbinic commentary upholds a principle of “measure for measure” that, in this case especially, means that we must endure at times hardship in order to earn our successes. That is not a perspective I would ever attempt to impress upon another person during their adversity, but I sympathize with that worldview given my own life struggles and attempts to make meaning out of them.

May we all be blessed to find and amplify light in our lives during this time of increasing physical and spiritual darkness. Our rabbinic tradition can provide us with road maps for this journey, but we must find our own way in traveling towards the destination.

Rabbi Andy Shugerman, Executive Director

Parashat Miketz - Genesis 41:1 - 44:17

The chief cupbearer did not think of Joseph; he forgot him. / At the end of two years' time, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile...

Genesis Rabbah 89:1

ויהי מקץ שנתים ימים (איוב כח) קץ שם לחשך זמן נתן לעולם כמה שנים יעשה באפילה ומאי טעם קץ שם לחושך
שכל זמן שיצר הרע בעולם אופל וצלמות דכתיב (שם) אבן אופל וצלמות נעקר יצר הרע מן העולם אין אופל
וצלמות בעולם דבר אחר קץ שם לחשך זמן נתן ליוסף כמה שנים יעשה באפילה בבית האסורים כיון שהגיע הקץ
חלם פרעה חלום

At the end of two years' time... (Gen. 41:1). [It is written:] He sets bounds for darkness...(Job 28:3) – [God] set a definite period of time for the world to spend in darkness. What is the proof? He sets bounds for darkness, [to every limit that a person may probe, to the stones of thick darkness and the shadow of death.](ibid.) For as long

as the Evil Inclination exists in the world, thick darkness and the shadow of death persist in the world; once the Evil Inclination is uprooted from the world, thick darkness and the shadow of death will no longer be in the world.

Another interpretation: He sets bounds for darkness...(Job 28:3) - [God] fixed a definite period of time for Joseph to spend in the darkness of prison. When the appointed time came, Pharaoh dreamed a dream (that led to Joseph's release.)

During the outreach classes I led for the Jewish Theological Seminary in Florida, I fielded questions about evil and suffering with what seems to be greater frequency each week. Was there a connection between the decreased hours of daylight and my adult students' concern about why bad things happen to good people?

Some years ago, when the Winter Solstice immediately preceded the first night of Hanukkah, I learned that this week's Torah portion, Miketz, always coincides with this "festival of lights." Not until this year, however, did I discover the midrash above, which provides a link between the increased physical darkness experienced by most of world Jewry (and by our ancient Sages) at this time of the year and the spiritual darkness of Joseph's unjust imprisonment in Egypt. Perhaps our primal fear of nighttime and its dangers triggers other feelings of dread regarding mortality and suffering.

It is striking, then, to consider the parallels between Joseph and Job suggested in this midrash. Both men innocently suffer due to the jealousy of an adversarial force and afterwards must explain the meaning of this fall from grace. Joseph declares that "it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you...God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance." (Gen. 45:5, 7) No less extraordinary are God's deliverance of Job from affliction or the protagonist's response after chapters of protest speeches: "I know that You can do everything, that nothing proposed is impossible for You...Indeed, I spoke without understanding of things beyond me, which I did not know." (Job 42:2-3)

Both of these biblical men survived tremendous anguish and somehow regained faith in life, family, and God by finding light after a period of profound darkness. They overcame their respective adversities by uncovering meaning in their suffering and in their perseverance. Let us similarly illuminate the darkness around us during this holiday of rededication to tradition. May we draw from these examples of personal transformation to lift our bodies and spirits from gloom to wholeness.

This week's Torah commentary was written by Rabbi Andy Shugerman, Executive Director of FJMC.