

ואל שדי יתן לכם רחמים, ... אמר ליה רבי אלכסנדרו אין לך אדם בלא יסורים. ... א"ר יהושע בן לוי כל יסורים שהם באים על האדם ומבטלין אותו מדברי תורה יסורים של תוכחת הם אבל יסורים שהם באים על האדם ואין מבטלין אותו מדברי תורה יסורים של אהבה הן, כדכתיב (משלי ג) כי את אשר יאהב ה' יוכיח

“May God grant you mercy . . .” Rabbi Alexandri would say, “There is no person who does not experience suffering . . . Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi would say, “Suffering that prevents one from words of Torah, this is considered sufferings of rebuke, but suffering that does not prevent one from words of Torah, this is suffering of love, as it is written, “For whom the Lord loves, He rebukes.” (Proverbs 3:12)

Who among us has not experienced suffering? After all, loss, sadness, and struggle are as much a part of life as joy, happiness, and triumph. This is as apparent in the emotional arc of Joseph and his family in this week's parashah as it is in life's experience. As Rabbi Alexandri says in the above midrash, “There is no person who does not experience suffering.”

But how are we to understand suffering? The midrash presents two possible approaches. If our suffering prevents one from engaging in Torah, from engaging in the world, then this suffering is due to a personal failing, due to sin. If, however, our suffering does not prevent us from Torah, from engaging in the world, then the suffering is an expression of God's love for us. The midrash divides suffering into two neat categories: suffering caused by sin and suffering without cause that serves (possibly euphemistically) as a form of Divine love.

But the verse this midrash is based on provides an additional approach to suffering. Read in context, Genesis 43:14 is translated, “And may El Shaddai dispose the man to mercy toward you . . .” The verse is not about God bestowing mercy on people, but a wish from Jacob that the powerful magistrate in Egypt, who has kidnapped Simeon and demands Jacob's favored son, Benjamin, will act with mercy. The magistrate, who is Joseph in disguise, is in turn suffering his own emotional turmoil brought about by the chance encounter with his brothers who sold him into slavery. Read in this context, the mercy described in Genesis 43:14, the mercy that is able to help dull the pain of suffering, does not come from God but finds its source in humanity. That there is suffering in the world, whether suffering with cause or without cause, is a fact we have little control over. What we do have control over is our reaction to that suffering. The hidden message of this midrash is a suggestion that we strive to embody Jacob's wish, that we ask God to help dispose us to mercy—mercy toward community, family, and, most importantly, toward ourselves.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Mi-ketz and Hanukkah Day 4
Genesis 41:1–44:17 and Numbers 7:30–41
December 24, 2011
28 Kislev 5772

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Abigail Treu, rabbinic fellow and director of Planned Giving, JTS.

“Disappointment is a much more fertile ground for spiritual practice than dreams,” teaches yoga guru Saradananda, and while the dreams of Parashat Mi-ketz offer plenty of fodder for spiritual musings, it is ultimately the disappointment of an old father that guides our spiritual practice this week.

Parashat Mi-ketz is the heart of the Joseph story, but it is also a story about Jacob growing old. He is, when we first see him this week, still strong and full of confident authority, assessing the severity of the famine and directing his sons to procure food from Egypt (Gen. 42:1–2). But as the boys return home with the bad news that Simeon has been detained in Egypt and that they were set up to appear as thieves, we see that this is just a façade. Jacob berates them and is full of self-pity: “It is always me you bereave . . . These things always happen to me!” (Gen. 42:36). He then refuses to send Benjamin into Egypt, for “if he meets with disaster on the journey you are taking, you will send my white head down to Sheol in grief” (Gen. 42:38).

What happened to that confident young man who impulsively extorted Esau's birthright and conned his father into blessing him as the firstborn? Even just a few chapters ago, we watched with bated breath as he lined up his family and fortune to face his grown brother-nemesis in a carefully calculated balance of tactical strength and defensive strategy. These images are snapshots from an earlier phase in Jacob's life, the phase before he lost his beloved Rachel and favored Joseph. The Jacob we encounter in Mi-ketz has suffered the heartbreak of devastating loss, and although he retains strains of his formerly take-charge, confident self, he is paralyzed with the fear of sustaining such loss again.

Rabbi Miriyam Glazer, in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, writes that “the very notion of ‘closure’ for grief is an illusion.” We grieve and life marches on, and so we put one foot in front of another and face another day. But like Jacob we are fundamentally changed. And like Jacob, when we find ourselves in another situation that evokes deep fear—of loss, betrayal, or other pain—we resist.

What happens, though, when the time comes to take some action that is terrifying to the very core? Like Jacob we are often faced with being in a situation we had no intention of ever being in. “The famine in the land was severe” (Gen. 43:1), and having run out of their Egyptian rations, Jacob and his family are faced with starvation. Jacob instructs his sons to “go again and procure some food for us” (ibid.), and when Judah reminds him that such a journey can be successful only with Benjamin in tow, Jacob responds with blame: “Why did you serve me so ill as to tell the man that you had another brother?” (Gen. 43:6). Judah defends their actions and pushes his father to recognize the corner he’s in. Ultimately Jacob acquiesces, and his response is the beginning of our spiritual lesson: “If it must be so, do this,” he begins (Gen. 43:11), and he goes on to outline a full plan to soften the Egyptian authority with gifts. He concludes with a prayer that God should have mercy on them, and then a final note of resignation: “As for me, if I am to be bereaved, I shall be bereaved” (Gen. 43:14).

The psychologists of our community could identify the stages of Jacob’s decision-making here: first resistance, then blame, then resignation bolstered with a plan that offers the illusion of control in a situation completely out of one’s control, followed by a prayer—the acknowledgment of just how out-of-control the situation is—and finally: “*k’asher shakhalti shakholti*”: “If I am to be bereaved, I shall be bereaved.”

The phrasing recalls the voice of Esther, and the parallel is striking. Like Jacob, she is stuck in a situation she had no intention of being in and desperately wants to avoid. Like Jacob, she first resists reality but is convinced of having no choice by someone close to her who is affected by the situation at hand (Mordecai). Like Jacob, she formulates a plan to make her feel more in control (three days of communal fasting), and finishes with resignation to the pain she may suffer: “*ka’asher avad’ti, avad’ti*”: “If I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:16 and previous). How deeply human a response: to resist, to furtively plan, to finally resign.

So what are the emotional triggers of resignation, a resignation that enables one to move past fear and to act? Rashbam and Ramban—both of whom note the linguistic parallels of these two texts—offer two different answers. Rashbam understands Jacob’s “if I am bereaved, I am bereaved” as his way of saying, “I’ll take my chances; what will be, will be.” It is a resignation born of total lack of control over the outcome. For him, the lesson is that we face life’s challenges and scariest moments by taking a deep breath and acknowledging how little control we have, and by embracing uncertainty as a fact of life.

Ramban sees it differently. He understands the phrase as rooted in Jacob’s heartbreak: “Jacob is saying that you can no longer add to my bereavement as I am already bereaved. He thus consoled himself about everything that came upon him by his great suffering for Joseph.” In this read, heartbreak makes us stronger; it enables us to dig deep within to console ourselves and face life’s challenges by knowing how much we have already survived and how strong we are to handle whatever comes next.

Rabbi Glazer suggests that life offers only “the tentative recognition that our anguish is endurable, that—despite ourselves—life goes on and engages us

with new emotions, new situations and images, new challenges and changes.” In the middle of a story about dreams and happy endings, the glimpse at Jacob facing difficult situations with a broken heart reminds us of words uttered by the philosopher Bertrand Russell: “To conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom.”

The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z”l) Hassenfeld.

A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

Having risen from the pit of despair (literally and figuratively), Joseph ascends to become second in command to Pharaoh. His meteoric rise is attributed to his skillful dream interpretation. Joseph is gifted not only with political office and power, but also a family:

Before the years of famine came, Joseph became the father of two sons, whom Asenath . . . bore to him. Joseph named the firstborn Manashe, meaning “God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home.” And the second he named Ephraim, meaning “God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction.” (Gen. 41:50–52)

What import is connected to the act of naming? Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains:

Nashani [Manashe] is usually translated as “God made me forget all my misfortune and all my father’s house.” Whose heart does not turn within him at this thought? Joseph calls his firstborn after the fact that God has allowed him to forget his old father and all his family. That certainly would solve the question as to why Joseph had not bothered about his father for such a long time . . . Fortunately, however, “to forget” is not the only meaning of *nasheh*. This word also means “to be a creditor” and *nashani* can just as well mean: God has made my misfortunes and my family into creditors. What had seemed up until this point to be misfortune and mishandling, has now become the greatest joy given by God so that I am deeply indebted to my misfortune and my family. (Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, 587)

In a poetic and intriguing twist, Hirsch gives new meaning and new life to understanding the intent behind the name Manashe. Rather than being rooted in “forgetfulness” and divorcing one’s self from memory, the meaning of the name suggests “attribution of credit” and appreciation. Negativity is transformed into a radical rereading and reinterpretation of Joseph’s past. If we are to adopt Hirsch’s reading, this moment in the story becomes liminal. Our beloved (and once despised) protagonist Joseph begins the journey from restless and self-centered youth to mature and perceptive adult and leader. For it is only such an individual that can reframe the setbacks and losses in life into a constructive lens by which to understand the past and move forward toward a more productive and more hopeful future.

The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.