

Faith by Numbers



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Most often, when I describe my own faith in God, I liken it to a number line from middle school math class. On the left are the negative numbers, in the center is the lonely zero, and to its right are all the positive numbers, stretching toward infinity.

There have been times in my life when my “belief number” was solidly positive; periods where I was inspired by Jewish teachers and expanding my knowledge base, times of solitude and sanctity in nature, times spent in the warmth of community and finding meaning in mitzvot.

And there have also been times where my “belief number” slid significantly negative; a loved one with cancer, a funeral for a friend, social unrest, and yes, a global pandemic.

I find it comforting to discuss my faith openly in this way, for unlike Maimonides, my faith is not “perfect”; nor is it static. Instead, it is dynamic and filled with the potential for skepticism. Or said another way: “I believe with a perfect faith in the existence of my doubt.”

Perhaps it is my “doubt-filled faith” which has always made me feel theologically distant from the Biblical figure of Joseph.

In Parashat Vayiggash, we read of the moment when Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers, ending the ruse that caused them to bring his youngest brother, Benjamin, down with them to Egypt.

Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still well?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dumfounded were they on account of him.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come forward to me.” And when they came forward, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt.

Now do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you. It is now two years that there has been famine in the land, and there are still five years to come in which there shall be no yield from tilling. God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt. (Gen. 45 3–8)

Three times in Joseph’s speech to his brothers he makes clear that it was *Elohim*, God, and not Joseph’s brothers who designed that he be brought down to Egypt. Indeed, it was *lemihyah*, for the sake of keeping others alive, that God sent Joseph down to Egypt. So, Joseph wasn’t offering forgiveness to his brothers; in fact, he was saying thank you—a thank you born from his deep faith in God’s plan.

Following in this vein, the Sefat Emet (Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter, 1847–1905) sees Joseph’s use of the phrase “I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt” as being similar to God’s words to Moses in Exodus 34:1. There, following Moses’ smashing of the original tablets, God says:

“Carve two tablets of stone like the first, and I will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you shattered.”

In Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 87a we find a midrash of Reish Lakish on this phrase “which you shattered”: “*Yishar Kohakha*—that you shattered them!” “Good for you for breaking them!” Therefore, the Sefat Emet explains, in both Joseph’s recollection of his brothers selling him into slavery and in God’s commandment to Moses to inscribe new tablets

to replace the ones he broke, a past mistake is brought up not as a moment of admonishment, but as a profound statement of gratitude; a gratitude that is born from faith. God has a plan. Even in the deepest and darkest pits of despair, like the one Joseph found himself in, *gam zu letovah*¹ (this too can be designed for good; designed to be *lemiyah*, to bring life).

In his commentary to our parashah, the *Netivot Shalom* (Rabbi Sholom Noah Berezovsky, 1911–2000) shares a story from the *Zohar* about what makes Joseph such a unique figure of righteousness and faith in our tradition.

Rabbi Abba was walking on the road, when he saw two divine miracles take place to a man who was seemingly unaware. Rabbi Abba asked him why he merited such miracles? The man explained that each and every day he forgives all those who do wrong to him; but not only that, he also seeks to pay them back with goodness! At this Rabbi Abba cried: “This is even greater than what is said about Joseph, since this one not only forgives completely, but he also returns them an immediate kindness!”

Perhaps surprised by Rabbi Abba’s statement in the *Zohar* that this man’s actions were “even greater” than Joseph’s, the *Netivot Shalom* explains:

And why was this greater even than Joseph? It is because Joseph’s faith came to him due to his exceeding holiness, that he was never conditioned to see that anything could be for bad, seeing as it was all part of the Divine plan; Joseph only saw the purpose, the ultimate vision of how things would turn out in the end.

These past two years have, at times, felt like we have all been living in Joseph’s pit. The walls surrounding us and separating us feel tall and immense, and it has been a struggle to see the light at the end of the pandemic’s tunnel. As such, it is only natural that my “belief number” on that number line has seen

its slides to the left, questioning the very purpose of the darkness which seems to envelop us.

But these past two years have also been about surrendering the once-held illusion that we have such careful control of our lives, our careers, our families, and our very own bodies. We have all been taught the difficult but important lesson that the very “normalcy” of our lives might be irrevocably disrupted because of something we cannot even see with our naked eye.

And so, as we emerge from the darkness, I hope that we will turn to Joseph and borrow his ability to see not merely the present, but the purpose of God’s plan for our lives. And although I believe with a perfect faith in the existence of my doubt, I pray that this experience also pushes me and my “belief number” firmly toward faith.

¹ See B.T. Taanit 21a