FREEING THE SPIRIT

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

Divine providence seems to work in strange ways, especially for Joseph languishing in an Egyptian prison. Unjustly accused of making advances to Potiphar's wife, Joseph has been thrown into the dungeon and left there to rot. But destiny requires that he be released and elevated to high office in the royal palace, and to effect this important result, divine providence contrives a very outlandish set of circumstances.

As we read in this week's Torah portion, ten years after his incarceration Joseph meets up with two discredited palace functionaries, the royal cupbearer and the royal baker. One morning, he finds them despondent. He questions them and discovers that they both had disturbing dreams the previous night. He offers astute interpretations of their dreams, and the sequence of events bears out his predictions. Two years later, when Pharaoh has his own puzzling dreams, the cupbearer remembers Joseph's interpretive skills and recommends him to Pharaoh. Joseph is brought to the palace, where his brilliant interpretations and wisdom win him high office, and the rest is history.

This story certainly makes for high drama, but why were all these farfetched developments necessary? Why didn't divine providence manifest itself in a simpler way? Couldn't Joseph's release and rise to power have been effected through more commonplace events?

The commentators explain that Joseph's release from prison is meant to serve as a paradigm of the ultimate in human emancipation. The vicissitudes of life can cause a person to experience confinement of many sorts, not only physical incarceration but also psychological and emotional bondage of the spirit, which can often be far more painful.

How is a person to extricate himself from these situations? How can he escape the isolation sometimes imposed by his conditions? The answer is to focus on the needs of others. As long as a person is absorbed in his own miserable condition, he cannot help but wallow in self-pity to some degree and to walk on the edge of despair. Once he shifts his focus to others, however, his presence in confinement is no longer purposeless and negative. On the contrary, his is a positive presence bringing relief to others and fulfillment to himself. By freeing the spirit, he will in effect have emancipated himself from the shackles of his condition.

Joseph personified this approach. Unjustly accused and imprisoned, he did not withdraw into himself to bemoan his awful fate. Instead, he immediately became the heart and soul of the prison, always there to help a stricken inmate. In this sense, he effected his own emancipation even as he

still remained confined within the prison walls. And to drive home the point, Hashem contrived that his actual physical release should also be the result of the kindness he performed for others.

A prisoner was thrown into a cell with a large number of other prisoners. The walls of the prison were thick and damp, and high up on one side, far above the heads of even the tallest prisoners, was a tiny, heavily barred window that looked out over a barren piece of land. Every day, the new prisoner would drag his bed to the wall under the window. Then he would climb onto the bed, stand on his tiptoes and, stretching, was just able to rest his chin on the stone window sill. The other prisoners gathered in groups to talk or play games, but the new prisoner never participated. He just stood there all day, staring out the window.

"What do you see out there?" a prisoner asked him.

"Nothing," he replied.

"Then why do you stand there all day?"

"As long as I look out at the world outside," the new prisoner replied, "I still feel a little connection with it. I still have a little bit of my freedom. But once I turn away from this window and look only at the cell and my cellmates, all my freedom will be gone. Once I surrender to my situation, I will truly be imprisoned."

In our own lives, we are often pummeled by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Assailed by financial difficulties, family and childrearing problems, pressure in the workplace and all sorts of other strains and stresses, we can easily find ourselves becoming gloomy and depressed. So what can we do? How can we regain the equilibrium and morale we need to deal with our problems constructively? By throwing ourselves into helping families less fortunate than ourselves or an important community project. For one thing, focusing on others immediately relieves the distress of our own situations. But more important, it elevates us spiritually and allows us to view our troubles in the broader perspective of what has lasting value in the ultimate scheme of things and what does not. Text Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and **Torah.org**.

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