

LIVE TODAY TO LIVE TOMORROW/EARNING OUR SLICE OF ETERNITY

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

At the beginning of this week's Torah portion, we read about Yosef being catapulted from a miserable Egyptian dungeon to the highest office in the land—all in the twinkling of an eye. He secured this exalted position not only by interpreting Pharaoh's dream correctly but by offering Pharaoh incisive advice on how to deal with the impending years of famine. He advised the king to appoint a 'wise and discerning' man to implement a nationwide plan that would preserve the country's vast grain resources during the years of abundance. Those supplies would enable the population to survive the subsequent years of famine.

Yosef's advice so impressed Pharaoh, he immediately appointed Yosef to fill this critically important post, announcing that he couldn't hope to find anyone wiser and more discerning.

Pharaoh's behavior elicits an immediate question: Why single out the attributes of being "wise" and "discerning" for the task of securing Egypt's future by storing the overflow of its produce during the seven years of prosperity? This task would seem to require other talents, such as superlative organizational and managerial skills.

Furthermore, what did Pharaoh see in their brief initial encounter that so convinced him so that Yosef was 'wise and discerning'? Would it not have been more prudent for him to research other potential candidates before bestowing upon him such supreme honor and responsibility?

The commentaries explain that excellent administration skills were not the primary qualities necessary to succeed in such a gargantuan undertaking. Pharaoh knew that in the years of plenty, it would not be possible for the average person to visualize the devastating poverty that would soon consume the land. When resources are free and plentiful, it is only natural to squander and splurge.

Yet the message conveyed in his dream clearly told Pharaoh that the only way the nation's survival could be assured in the face of a devastating famine, would be by squirreling away every available grain during the years of plenty. Only one who would have the clarity of vision to see beyond the prosperity of the "here and now" would be capable of implementing the master plan. That plan required that every kernel of grain be accounted for, even in times of prosperity when people tend to be careless with their resources.

Success or failure depended upon how truly wise and discerning the person in command would be.

It depended upon an ability to detach from the present and stay focused on a vision of the future. Yosef demonstrated this ability by his very demeanor. He had not lost his aristocratic bearing in the squalor and misery of his incarceration—even after twelve years in the filth of an underground pit .

How had he survived such an ordeal? Was it by clinging to hope? Simply hoping that he would one day be released and exonerated would not have shielded an ordinary person from the devastating impact of victimhood that would be the natural side effects of such an ordeal.

Yet Yosef exhibited no such symptoms. Immediately upon his release, he stood before Pharaoh with a regal bearing. He interpreted Pharaoh's dreams while declaring Hashem's omniscience. Such a feat was only possible if during his incarceration he had lived and breathed the freedom he was certain Hashem would send his way.

The commentaries develop this theme further. On a spiritual level, our own existence is akin to Yosef's imprisonment. Our souls are incarcerated within the temporary prison walls of our transient bodies. During our lifetime, we have opportunity to accrue mitzvos and good deeds, knowing these will be the only source of sustenance for our souls in the world to come.

These are truly our 'years of plenty'. Yet we dilly-dally along life's journey, entertaining ourselves with the myriad distractions that life has to offer. We intuitively realize how precious time is, yet inexplicably we postpone and delay our obligations. We squander the most precious gift of time knowing all the while that we will one day have to endure the consequences—years of famine when all we have for sustenance are the seeds we planted today.

Were we as 'wise and discerning" as Yosef, what a difference it would make in how we conducted our affairs!

The Chofetz Chaim provides a beautiful parable to illustrate the wisdom and discernment we need in this world to ensure that we have an eternal source of sustenance in the hereafter.

A successful businessman decided to treat himself to a luxury cruise on a private yacht for his 50th birthday. As he stepped aboard the vessel bound for the Caribbean Islands, the cares and worries of his financial empire melted away. As nightfall approached, the boat was moving at full throttle through an archipelago of small islands that marks the entrance of the Caribbean ocean. The fellow lay back on the deck, enjoying the night breeze. Suddenly, the boat smashed into a reef that the captain had failed to detect, and the stern instantly split apart. The impact of the crash threw the businessman into the water. He began swimming, hoping he would somehow reach an inhabited island before his strength ebbed away.

Dawn brought a stunning sunrise but no hint of the shore. He kept swimming through the day. The sun beat down on his head and exhaustion and fatigue overtook him. Before nightfall, he spied the outline of an island far ahead. As he drew close he saw a royal delegation descending upon the beach, as if preparing to welcome him. As he stepped out of the water, two attendants donned him

with velvet robes and he was escorted to a royal palace, amidst the cheers and delight of the islands inhabitants. He was waited upon hand and foot. Clearly they had assumed he was their long lost king!

No longer able to contain himself after a couple of months, he shared the secret of his true identity with the prime minister. The minister gazed at him, astonished. "Don't you know that in our island the tradition is that whoever is washed ashore becomes our king for one year?" he explained.

"And what happens after a year?" asked the king. "Well," the minister said, "after a year, we escort you back to the beach and we place you into a small wooden boat, casting you back to the ocean from where you came!"

The poor king was aghast. "Do you mean that after a year I am just sent out to sea to die?" he asked incredulously. "Yes," the prime minister answered.

"What do you suggest I do?" the king asked.

"It is simple," said the minister. "Only two miles south, southwest of this island lies an uninhabited island. Since you are the king, you can do whatever you want. Ship out to the island servants, maidservants, construction materials, plants, fruits and all that is necessary for a new life."

The king assiduously applied himself to the task. At daybreak each morning, he oversaw a small army of engineers and craftsmen who boarded boats and journeyed out to the island with shiploads of materials and supplies. At the end of the year, a solemn procession accompanied him down to the beach. Many of the islands inhabitants were crying as he stepped into the simple boat that would whisk him away. Over the course of the year, they had gotten to know the king and loved him dearly. Yet the "king's" heart was singing. He was leaving these people behind but the destination that awaited him was beautiful and secure.

At life's inception, we too are washed "ashore" and are indulged for many years in a loving and supporting environment. But as our faculties develop, we question the meaning of our existence. It takes a 'wise and discerning' heart to perceive the world of eternity that lies beyond the borders of our daily existence, and to understand how to fully utilize the present in order to earn our slice of eternity.

Wishing you a delightful Shabbos and a Freilichen Chanukah.

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