

SUCCESS BY WHOSE STANDARDS?

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

This week's class is dedicated to the speedy healing of Azriel Yitzchak ben Chaya Gitel.

"Hurry and go up to my father, and say to him, 'so says your son Yosef, "G-d has placed me as master over all Egypt -- descend to me, do not delay!'" [45:9]

Yaakov's son Yosef, after disappearing 22 years earlier, sends a message of consolation to his father. Yosef tells his father that he is now the ruler of Egypt, in power if not name, and invites his family to escape the famine in the Land of Israel by coming down to him.

Rabbi Yaakov Neiman, author of Darche Mussar, wonders what sort of consolation Yosef is providing when he touts his leading position with the Egyptians.

Imagine an upper-class American family whose young son disappears from their penthouse apartment in Manhattan. Twenty years later, Western Union delivers a telegram: their son is alive! Their son, Andrew, goes on to say that he now leads the largest Aboriginal tribe in Western Australia, and looks forward to holding a feast in their honor complete with rare iguana meat and a prized kangaroo.

Is that a consolation? Of course they are happy to know he's alive. But given their own aspirations and vision of what it means to be successful, is the fact that he's a leading Aborigine something that brightens their hearts?

If we look in Jewish sources, we are taught that our objective in life should be spiritual rather than material greatness. By that standard, why would Yaakov be happy to hear that his son was a viceroy? Why should he be any more delighted knowing his son is a leading Egyptian, than a tony pair of Manhattanites would be to learn their son is an Aboriginal tribal chieftain? On the contrary, if anything his disappointment and heartache should be all the greater.

So Rabbi Neiman explains: the key here is not the news that Yosef delivered, but rather how he phrased it. "G-d has placed me as master over all Egypt."

When a person attains a high position, it is normal for him to mention who appointed him, or who elected him, or how he managed to get there. Yosef, however, says nothing about Pharaoh. He attributes everything to G-d.

This being the case, we can understand why this was such good news to Yaakov. After so many years, and after Yosef was tested in so many different ways, having literally experienced both the lowest rank in an Egyptian prison, and the heights of rulership -- still, nothing has shaken the knowledge of G-d that he acquired in his father's house. He remained the holy individual that he had been. That is the news that Yosef knew would come as a tremendous delight to his father.

We, too, can decide which forms of greatness we care to pursue, and whose influences will rule our lives. Given a much greater choice of influences than Yosef, we should take advantage of every opportunity to choose the good!

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Yaakov Menken

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