

SADLY RELEASED FROM PRISON

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week's parsha, Miketz, begins with the words: "Va'y'hee miketz sh'nasayim yamim, u'Pharoah choleim (41:1)" - And it was at the end of two years and Paroah dreamt. Which two years? Yosef had been imprisoned based on a slanderous lie. There, he had successfully interpreted the dreams of both Paroah's butler and his baker. The butler would be reinstated and the baker hanged. Yosef had asked the butler to 'remember him' - to bring his case - before Paroah, hoping to thereby secure his release. For this misplacement of trust, for turning to the butler for help instead of placing total trust in Hashem, Yosef had to endure an additional two years in prison. "And it was at the end of these two years", when the heavenly ordained time for Yosef's release had arrived, "Paroah dreamt".

The Talmud teaches that "va'y'hee" - and it was - connotes a sorrowful episode. What was the cause of this sadness? At first glance, the conclusion of the two years of Yosef's imprisonment should have been a cause for celebration!

The Ohr HaChaim explains that the stage was now being set for the Egyptian exile to begin. With the advent of the famine, the family of Yaakov would soon descend to seek sustenance. The revelation of Yosef's position in Mitzraim would lead to their coming to live there. The start of the Egyptian exile clearly calls for the usage of a sorrowful term.

Alternatively, he explains that Hashem Himself feels sorrow when the world is in a state of affliction. The pain that the oncoming famine would bring, was the grounds for using this sorrowful term. Although Hashem certainly has the power to prevent any hardship in the world, when it is necessary for it to occur, He shares in the pain that we experience. It could be compared to, heaven forbid, a parent's sorrow over the amputation of a child's limb. Although it clearly is in the child's best interest, in order to prevent any spreading of the disease, nevertheless, the parent intimately feels the pain along with the child.

I thought that perhaps a different explanation could be offered. With the incredibly high level of trust in Hashem that he had reached, Yosef was held accountable for even turning to the butler for help. He therefore needed to spend an additional two years in prison. During these two years, Yosef realized his error, worked on himself and reached an even higher level. He had internalized the concept that our actions don't bring the results. He had mistakenly seen his approaching the butler and asking him to intercede on his behalf to Paroah as a means toward speeding his release. That was incorrect. Hashem might utilize our actions to appear as if they brought the result... but the actions themselves are powerless.

Yosef exhibited this new level he'd reached when he was summoned to interpret Paroah's dreams. Paroah said to Yosef that he'd heard that he knew how to interpret dreams. Yosef's response was unequivocal: "Bil'a'doy! (41:16)" - I've got nothing to do with it! Hashem will place the answer for you in my mouth.

Yosef had developed and elevated himself tremendously while in prison. Such growth would not have been possible elsewhere.

I read a true story of a soldier who had spent seven years in solitary confinement in a Vietnam POW camp. From the outset, he decided to view this as an opportunity to stay strong, to learn about himself and to get closer to G-d. He saw everything that happened as a personal development exercise. He came out of the seven years a totally transformed person. He said that he wouldn't give up the experience for a million dollars!

The truth is that our whole stint in this world should be viewed as such an opportunity. An opportunity to stay strong, to learn about ourselves and to get closer to Hashem. If all of the difficult situations which come our way would be viewed in such a way, life would be a lot easier to handle.

There is a seeming contradiction between two statements made in the very same Mishna (Avos 4:22). It states that all of the pleasure of the next world doesn't equal one moment of repentance and good acts in this world. It also states that all of the pleasures of this world don't equal one moment of pleasure in the world to come. How can these two statements be reconciled?

There is the gratification of working hard in order to accomplish something. I'm not much of a mountain climber but it's very clear that the true pleasure in conquering Everest is not the view afforded by reaching the summit. Rather, it is the incredible feeling of knowing that you've worked so hard for something so difficult and you've succeeded. It is the pleasure that this world offers and the next world does not.

On the other hand, there is a deep, real, spiritual pleasure that is in a totally different realm and world from the physical pleasures. It is like trying to compare the enjoyment of an ice cream cone to the pleasure achieved by truly connecting to someone you love. And even the pleasure of that connection is trivial when compared to the gratification of the intimate connection to Hashem in the next world. A lifetime of pleasures in this world, can't equal one moment of that pleasure in the world to come.

These two statements of chaza"l complement one another. There are two distinct aspects of pleasures - the striving and the goal - the means and the end - this world and the next.

Perhaps Yosef's time in prison and his subsequent release was a microcosm of this cycle. We know of great tzaddikim (very righteous individuals) who cried when they left this world. Such a world of opportunity, how can't one be saddened when the opportunities are no longer there. "Va'y'hee!" - And it was after the two years. Sadness. Yosef's leaving prison was the closing of an opportunity. An

opportunity that had transformed him. Va'y'hee, the joy of release was tempered with feelings of sadness.

The Medrash refers to the two years of Yosef's additional imprisonment as "choshech" - darkness. Interestingly, choshech is also the term used to describe the galus (exile) of Yavan (the Greeks). Darkness?! Weren't the Greeks the enlightened nation? Didn't they illuminate the world with their culture and their beauty? Don't our proud Olympic games trace back to the ancient Greeks? How could we describe the galus Yavan as choshech - darkness?

The darkness that the Greeks brought to the world was their superficiality. Beauty was an exterior attribute. They didn't want to physically destroy our Temple; they were satisfied to strip it of its inner beauty and meaning. Let its golden structure remain standing! Let there be another Taj Mahal in the world! But let it have no holiness, no connection to Hashem, no inner meaning.

The Mesilas Yeshorim explains that this world is compared to the darkness of night in two ways. Firstly, one simply doesn't see what is there. Secondly, and even more dangerous, one mistakes that which he sees. A pillar appears as a person, a person as a pillar. Crucially important things are perceived as being extraneous, harmful and dangerous things are sought after. This was the darkness that the Yevanim, with their superficiality, brought to the world.

Our Torah is referred to as light. It illuminates the darkness of this world and the galus we are in to give us perspective and clarity. It allows us to see through the misleading exterior and to discern the true essence and meaning of life. It allows us to live our lives in the manner for which we were created. It allows us to live our lives as Jews.

One of the blessings that we pronounce while kindling the Chanukah lights is that Hashem performed for us miracles in those days at this time (of year). May the lights of the Menorah illuminate our paths of life, allowing us to penetrate the exterior and to focus on the essence. May Hashem perform for us too, miracles at this time, with the coming of Moshiach Tzidkenu, Amein.

Have a good Shabbos and a joyous Chanukah,

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