

LIVING IN EXILE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

At the end of two full years, Pharaoh had a dream [in which] he was standing by the [Nile] river. (Bereishis 41:1)

When will the redemption come? I mean, enough is enough already. It is so frustrating how we have gone from losing 6,000,000 of our people in the Holocaust, to re-building our nation over the course of the next 70 years, thank God, and after being away from our land for 2,000 years returning there, and in spite of several terrible wars, becoming a leader in so many areas of life, only to be pressured into dismantling so much of what we have accomplished. What a pain in the historical neck!

I mean, for a while there everything looked so redemption-like. Now it often feels as if we are slipping back into the depths of exile once again, God forbid. We seem like a pendulum that has reached the top of its swing, and is now getting pulled back down by gravity. The energy of momentum can only override gravity for so long. Hey, did the chance for redemption come and go, God forbid, and we missed it because we were too distracted by other, more worldly things? I sure hope not.

That's the way it sure seemed to Yosef in his time. One day his life was just perfect, and the next thing he knew he was being kidnapped and sold into slavery by his own brothers! Overnight, he was thrown into the depths of exile, only to be redeemed shortly thereafter by Pharaoh's chief butcher, Potiphar, who made him the head of his household. Things were certainly looking up once again.

But, again, disaster struck. Of all the households over which to become head, his happened to have a mistress who wanted him, putting his life back into peril once again. As a result, everyday he came to work his life and future were at risk, and it wasn't as if he could simply quit his job and look for another one.

As to be predicted, his situation deteriorated once again. His previous redemption led to further exile after he rejected his master's wife's advances, and was forced to bear the brunt of her false accusations. No stranger to incarceration, he found himself back in jail another time, once again falsely accused, once again in a pit as a result.

Then, all of a sudden, redemption seemed to knock on Yosef's door once more, after Divine Providence had Pharaoh's chief baker and cup bearer thrown into the same jail as Yosef. They dreamed dreams that disturbed them, but which seemed to lack interpretation by everyone except

for Yosef, giving him an opportunity to enter their lives, and perhaps, for one of them to become his ticket to freedom.

But, apparently, it was not to be. Though everything had worked according to plan-the baker was executed and the wine steward was returned to his post as Yosef had foreseen-he was not recalled. There was no mention of his deed or his innocence before Pharaoh, and though the wine steward returned to his previous life, Yosef remained in his present one. Days become months, and months became years, until two of them, with little hope for freedom, had passed.

Then, all of a sudden, there was a knock on the door, and faster than Yosef had been put into jail, he was removed from it. Not only was he freed, but he was pampered until he was fit to stand before the king of Egypt, who, within a short while, made him Vice President of Egypt. The transformation from being powerless to powerful happened so quickly that he must have thought he was dreaming again.

All of a sudden, it all made sense. Not every piece of a puzzle is crucial for seeing the bigger picture, but some are so important that without them, it is as if nothing had been done to assemble the puzzle until they arrived. That had certainly been the case in Yosef's life, until the most important piece of his puzzle finally showed up, 12 years after his world had begun to fall apart: miketz.

History works kind of like DNA. Most people do not look everyday in the mirror for gray hairs, or aging features. Rather, one day, while looking in the mirror, they may happen to notice them. They just sort of spring up, all of a sudden, and very often, ahead of schedule, as far as we are concerned. But not as far as our body clocks are concerned. Amazingly, from conception, when we are still too small to be seen even through most microParashas scopes, our body clocks start ticking with instructions that will be fulfilled throughout our physical lives, including at what age our hair should turn gray, or our faces should wrinkle, etc. It always happens right on schedule, our DNA schedule, though early for us, because we do not desire to become old, and certainly not to become feeble and die.

Personally, I still think young. I was always athletic, and barely gained a pound of weight, no matter what I ate, for about 20 straight years. Then, around the age of 30, things started to change. My metabolism, which was always about average, began to slow down. I remember standing around one day with some colleagues of mine as we all bemoaned the fact that our eating habits were becoming more apparent by the month in the form of extra weight.

So, I started to exercise once again, and sure enough, most of the weight came off over a few weeks. However, I began to notice that if I did not keep up my exercising, the weight came right back, especially if I ate well over Shabbos, week after week. It was pressure I had never to live with before, and it was becoming a little frustrating.

Ten years later, the situation did not improve, but got worse as my metabolism slowed down even more, and gray hair began to appear. YIKES! I have never been overly concerned about my

appearance, not more than the halachah and Mussar says men should be, but gray hair meant something: I was getting old!

Furthermore, no longer did exercise do very much to take off the extra weight. And, though I could work myself up to a pretty good exercise schedule, I usually paid for it some time later on, like the next morning getting out of bed. Not only was I losing hair, but I was losing flexibility as well, and things began to hurt, like my back, for example.

The old gray mare, she aint what she used to be, aint what she used to be, etc.

All of this comes to me as a surprise, until I recall my age. Unlike with most journeys in life, this one did not come with a pre-printed schedule of events to tell me where to be and by what time. The journey of life seems to be a secret to everyone except to God; the best we can do is approximate what will happen to us and by when, but you can be sure that when it comes to bodily changes and aging, there will always bound to be surprises.

As Yosef found out, that is true inside the body, and outside the body as well. Every event that occurred to him from the moment he was conceived until the last one he breathed on earth, was carefully orchestrated by Heaven, to occur at a precise time, to have a precise affect on Yosef, the world around him, and all the generations to follow him. It's just that no one ever gave him the schedule to follow, for that would have been a violation of the laws of free-will.

And, each time his life turned a corner, it was a keitz, a predestined moment in time by which his life was meant to turn a corner. He might have thought to keep walking straight, so-to-speak, and that is why the event caught him by surprise or seemed abrupt. But, had he seen the script of his life, he would have been ready to turn that corner in concert with history and Divine Providence. He would have ready for each keitz.

Of course, we rarely are. This is because, for the sake of free-will, we are not shown the scripts of our lives, and therefore, we tend to be impacted upon rather than be impactful. The average person works very hard to maintain status quos, and then has to do a lot of fancy footwork to recover from situations that upset them. If they don't, then they end up living out of sync with reality, and there are plenty of people walking around doing that.

This is not the Torah way. The Torah way teaches that the only status quo there is in history is the will of God, and His masterful plan for Creation, of which we are just one of billions of parts. Whither goes the will of God, goes man as well, and history after him. Knowing this makes all the difference in the world, and the next one as well, for the will of God is extremely dynamic, and we have to be as well.

Let me give you an example. Recently, someone of relative prominence where he used to live decided to make aliyah. As to be expected, even though it was known that such a decision was destined to happen one day, when it was finally announced, it seemed to come earlier than most

people had expected, so it caught the attention of many.

This led to a local interview, during which the person expressed his opinions about the importance of making aliyah, and of not remaining in the Diaspora too much longer, especially given the direction of the current American government. In retrospect, some comments might not have been appropriate for such a wide audience, but the gist of the message was that the exile is coming to an end, and we Jews had better watch out and be ready to leave.

BOOM! As you can imagine, the person's comments were not warmly welcomed by much of the community he was leaving behind, and the reaction was swift and furious. If anyone took the person's comments to heart in a positive way, they were not the ones responding, because the feedback was quite negative, including from rabbis who addressed the issue from their pulpits, basically condemning the comments.

In reviewing the entire episode, I can't help but to relate to the person's comments, and to be nervous about the reaction. Personally, I might have been a little more diplomatic about how I would have said the same thing, but the basic content is what I believe in. But, the reaction? All I hear are people who are really saying:

"Look, if you want to make aliyah and reject the United States as your home, then that is your problem. But don't make it seem as if you are doing it for reasons that affect us too, as if by not following in your footsteps or worrying about the future, we are endangering ourselves and our families! We have a status quo to protect!"

That may be. But what about the keitzin? If you are so committed to maintaining the status quo of exile, and insist on running history your own way, then how will you not snap when God makes history turn the corner, and quickly. Isn't that what happened in Spain in 1492, in Europe in 1942, and just about everywhere else in-between? Will we ever learn not to dig in too deep in golus?

I think that is one of the reasons why Yosef was put through all that he went through, and his father, Ya'akov as well. It was to make precisely this point. When it comes to the will of God, and how He exercises it through out history, you have to be what we say in Hebrew: gamish-flexible. Exile is exile, no matter how comfortable it can become. Live it as if it can end at any time, and in the worst of ways. It's the only way to safely navigate those historical changes of direction, and to be impactful, as opposed to only being impacted upon.

Text

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