

ACHIEVING GREATNESS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The astounding and amazing story of Yosef continues in this week's parsha. Through a series of inexplicable events, Yosef finds himself raised from being a kidnapped victim and slave who was thrust into prison and doomed to oblivion, to becoming the chief minister of the Pharaoh and the Egyptian Empire. Yosef takes all of this in stride and certainly sees it as being part of a series of events that had to happen since they were divinely ordained and predicted to him in his youthful dreams.

One who expects miracles to happen apparently is not overly impressed when they actually do occur. Yosef's inner voice had long ago told him that he was destined for power and greatness and so the unusual events that befall him are unable to destabilize him. He somehow knows that he will be a ruler of men and the leader of his brothers.

There are many instances in human and Jewish history where people, early on in their lives, realize they were born to greatness and enormous potential achievement. The prophet Yirmiyahu is told in his initial vision of prophecy that he was already ordained, in his mother's womb, to become the prophet of Israel. All men may be created equal but we are well aware that not everyone comes into this world with equal talents and opportunities.

Achieving greatness is not preordained, though the circumstances that may allow one to rise to greatness apparently are. The dreams that guided Yosef in his youth and that brought him to initial travail and later to unbelievable triumph told him of opportunity but provided no guarantee of fulfillment. Only Yosef himself, through his own actions and ingenuity, could bring the promise of those dreams to fruition.

So, too, is it with all of us. One of the central issues and questions of life deals with the fulfillment of one's potential and the positive exploitation of the circumstances of life that are dealt to us. Yosef's words to the butler/officer of Pharaoh while in prison - "I was stolen from the land of the Hebrews and I have done nothing wrong here and now I find myself imprisoned" - is not to be read as being solely a lament over the circumstances of life that have overtaken him. Rather, it was a statement of fact upon which Yosef built his hopes for the future. He implored the butler/officer of Pharaoh to remember him to the king and set him free.

Yosef sees in this seemingly chance encounter in prison with the butler/officer, the opportunity to pursue his goal and rise to greatness. Yosef will not squander that opportunity nor will he wallow in

despair or rail against the fate that has treated him so cruelly. He will not allow events and circumstances to deter him from the realization and actualization of his dreams and visions.

Rather, he will attempt to use and exploit all of those circumstances to make his dreams reality and to achieve the greatness that he believes he is entitled to and has been promised to him. This lesson of human fortitude has guided the Jewish people throughout the long night of our exile and dispersion. We are currently faced with difficult circumstances and troublesome events. We should, somehow, attempt to turn them to our advantage and realize our age-old dream of Zion and Jerusalem.

Shabbat shalom

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com